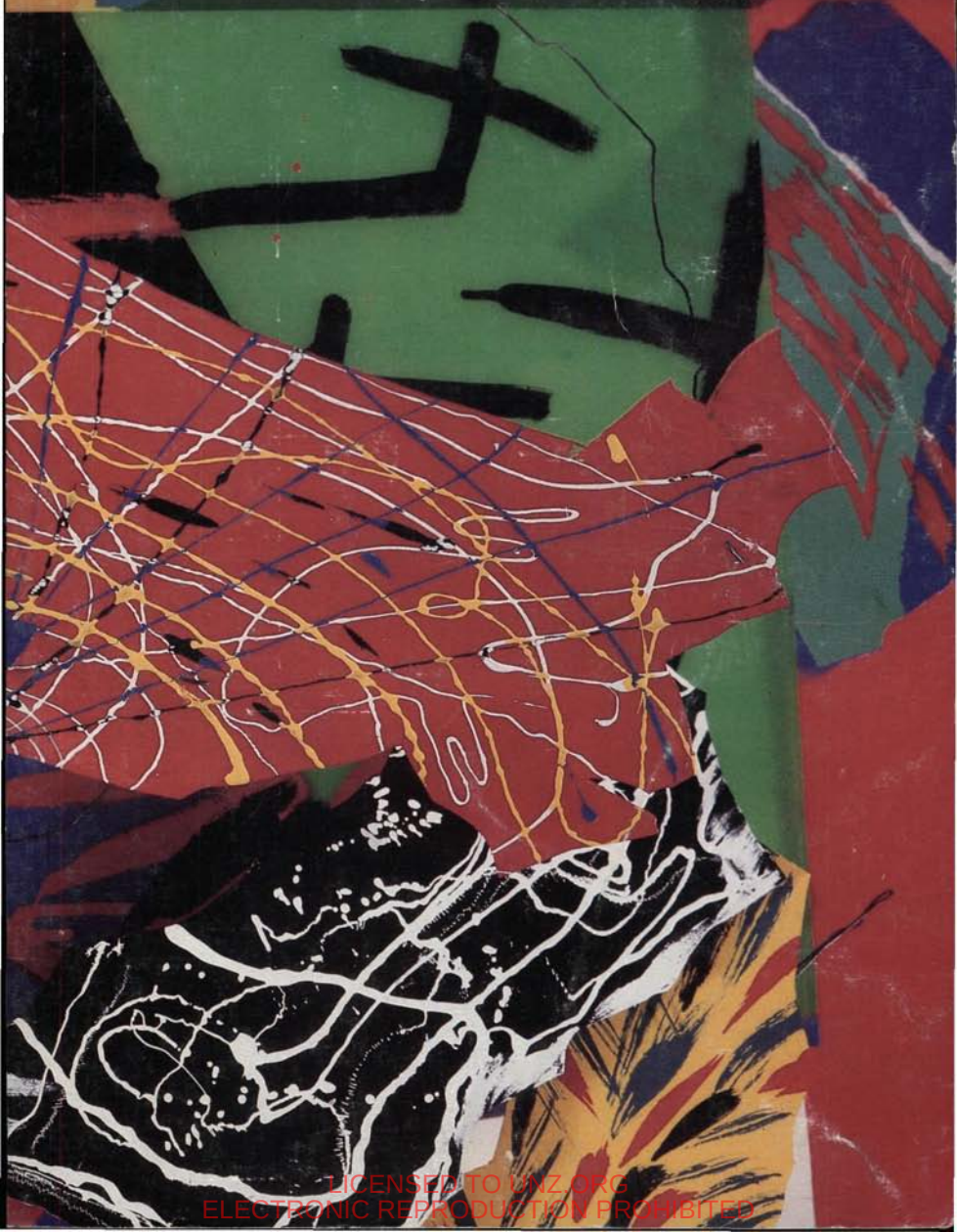


The Paris Review

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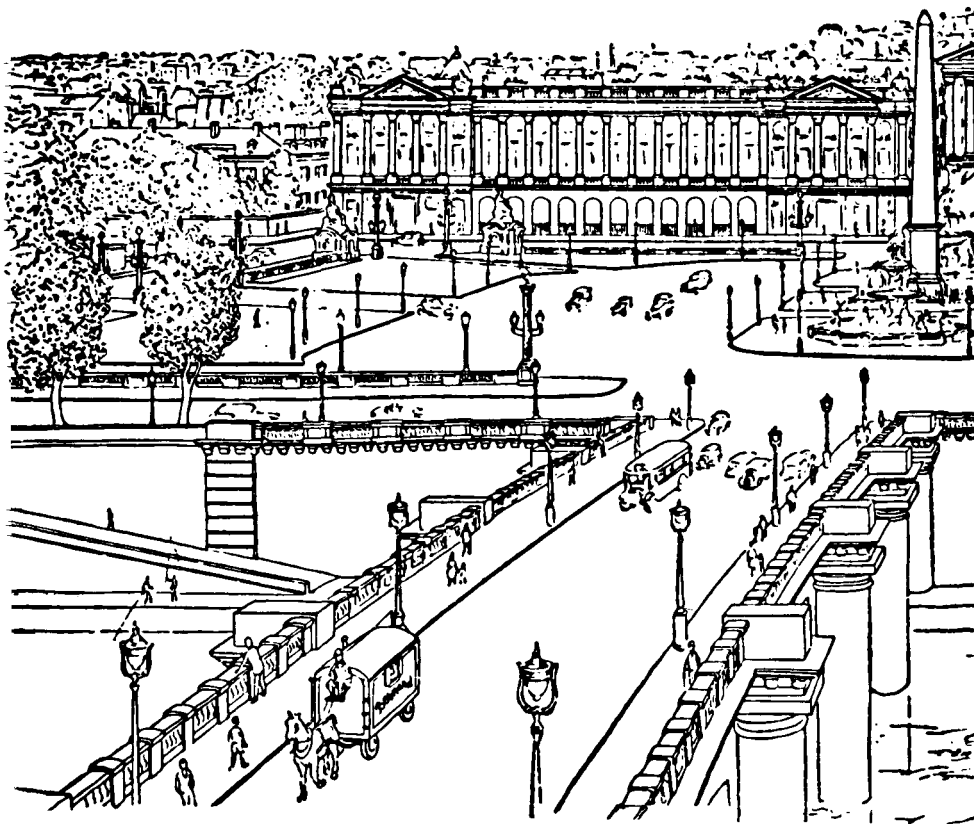
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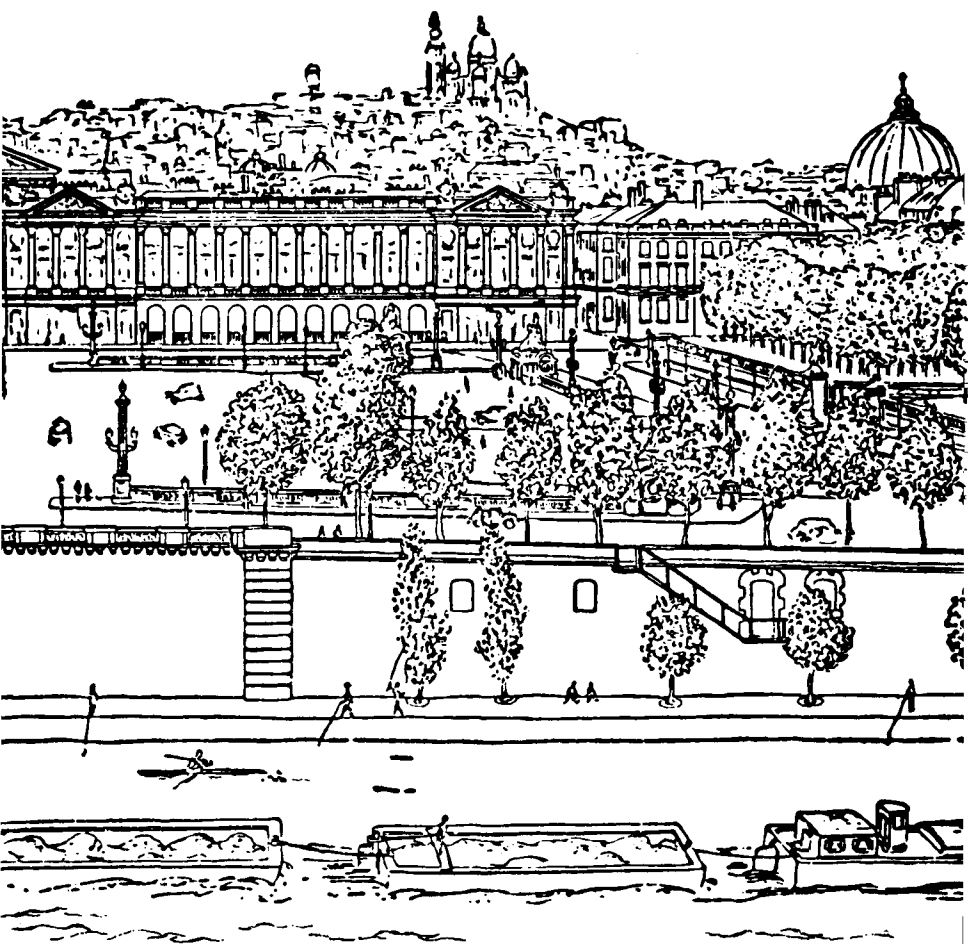
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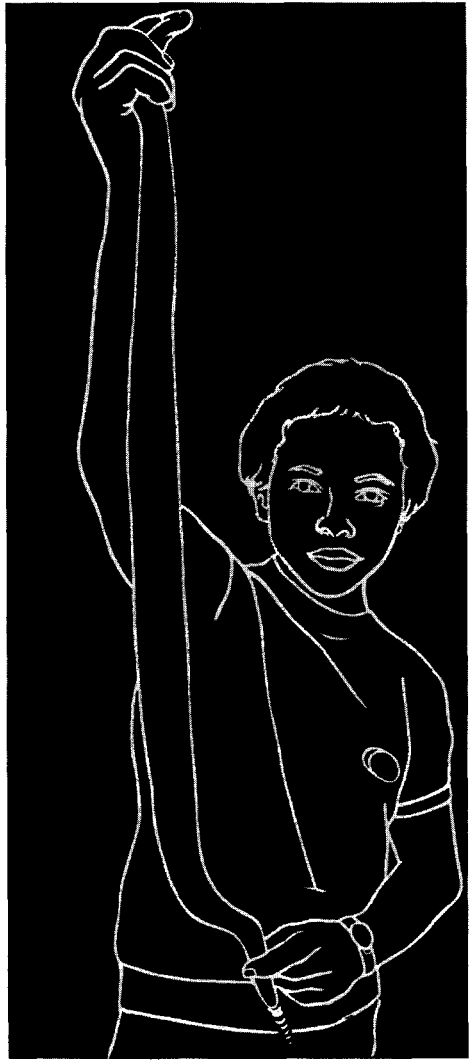
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Mawrdew Czigowchwz in Dublin

James McCourt

As reported in *Mawrdew Czigowchwz*, Mawrdew Czigowchwz, oltrano, born Maev Cohalen at Convent-on-the-Rock, Connemara, on Easter Sunday, 1916, left New York in the fall of 1956 to go to Dublin to star in the motion picture *Pilgrim Soul*, the story of Great Flaming Maev Cohalen, her mother, Ireland's Joan of Arc. The picture, a Hyperion Productions feature, directed by Orphrey Whither, began principal photography in early November.

Other characters represented as absent and present in the following segment of The Mawrdew Czigowchwz Saga are, in order of appearance:

Jacob Beltane, oltrano, the Mawrdew Czigowchwz consort.

Lola Montes.

Johnny Farrell, publican.

John McCormack.

Ernestine Schumann-Heink.

Aodghan Moon, vaudevillian.

Cleofonte Gennaio, Mawrdew Czigowchwz's analyst.
Tangent Percase, a New York culture arbiter.
Theophile Plafond, a hatter.
Consuelo Gilligan, a Society woman and seeress in New York.
Cégèste, a hair designer in New York.
Arpenik, a great New York Armenian woman.
Jan Vaclav Motivyk, Mawrdew Czigowchwz's Bohemian philosopher father.
A British regular on duty in Ireland in 1916.
Lily Daché, the hatter.
Jackson Pollock, the painter.
Maria Meneghini Callas, soprano.
Victoria de los Angeles, soprano.
Mike Riordan, stage door keeper of the Gaiety Theater.
Merovig Creplacz, composer, Mawrdew Czigowchwz's former lover.
Max Ophuls, film director.
Serafina X., soprano.
The Countess Madge O'Meaghre Gautier, Mawrdew Czigowchwz's oldest, fiercest friend in New York, an Irishwoman.
Achille Plonque, tenor.
Ralph, the head of the New York Czigowchwzians.
Rinuccia Bagatelli, soprano.
Dame Sybil Farewell-Tarnysy, the British harpsichordist.
Evangeline Tablowe, soprano.
Julius Caesar.
John Field, Irish composer.
Patrick More, British actor.
Michael Yew, British poet.
The Younger Johnny Farrell.
S.D. Jameson O'Maurigan, poet, nephew to the Countess Madge, champion of Mawrdew Czigowchwz.
Dolores, the columnist.
Gargantua, a gossip.
Johnny Donovan, a Society guttersnipe in New York.
Trixie Gilholley, a showgirl.

Thalia Bridgewood, the toast of the New York Rialto.
Nathaniel Hawthorne.

G-G: Gaia della Gueza, a Czegowchwz stalwart in New York.

Mr. B: George Balanchine.

Laverne Zuckerman, mezzo-soprano.

The Big Z: Zaguina Milanese, soprano.

Maisie Halloran, her companion.

Morgana Neri, soprano. Mawrdew Czegowchwz's New York rival, a psychotic.

Rosa Ponselle, soprano.

Pope Pius XII.

Gaetano Donizetti.

Francis Poulenc.

Hector Berlioz.

Richard Wagner.

Richard Strauss.

Jules Massenet.

Giacomo Puccini.

Vincenzo Bellini.

Giuseppe Verdi.

Dante.

God.

Count Fabrizio Neri, Morgana Neri's supposed father.

Morgana Neri's mother.

Pope St. Pius X.

Mozart.

Francis Robinson, Assistant General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera.

La Principessa Oriana Incantevole, an Italian mad-woman.

Olive Middleton, soprano.

Luigi Francobolli, music critic.

Settimo Ottaviani, restaurateur.

Mussolini.

Clara Petacci, his mistress.

Tramontini, the conductor.

Licia Albanese, soprano.

Fiorenza, his wife.
Enzo Cedrioli, a Calabrese.
Mary Cedrioli, a woman driven mad by Morgana Neri's
villainy.
Arturo Neri, Morgana Neri's supposed brother.
H. Rider Haggard.
St. Francis of Assisi.
Alban Berg.
Mae West.
Calypso, Homeric nymph.
Alexander Hollenius, composer, enemy of Mawrdew
Czgowchwz, murdered by Christine Radcliffe, the
pianist.
Francisco Cavalli.
Tiepolo.
Ghiringhelli, Capo of La Scala.
The Nameless Capo of the Metropolitan Opera.
The Angels of the Fenice in Venice.
Girolamo Muzio, a Venetian.
Claudia Muzio, soprano.
The Dubliners.
The Legates of the President of the Republic of Ireland
and
Others of old acquaintance.



The Galway Express, *An Domain Thair*, having delivered them to *Baile Atha Cliath*, Dublin, the capital, they lay, consort companions, looking out one of the Gresham's floor-length windows.

"Lola Montes was Irish."

"They told me. They volunteered that information the same day they told me you were English and far too young for me."

They had eaten a cream tea. Orphrey Whither protested he never ate tea, and in any event it was high time he went below and worked the boulevards, the holy hour having

ended. *Pilgrim Soul* would commence shooting any day. He'd be at Johnny Farrell's, seeing to the setting up of the dais for that evening's celebration. Meanwhile, runners must of necessity be engaged—for all along the winding stretch of Grafton Street up to Stephen's Green, and from the queue for returns at the Gaiety to the lobbies of the Shelbourne, and the Royal Hibernian, and in the Green Room at the Queen's, and in conversation at Noonan's, and at Bewlay's (among the good Protestants), and in whispers in the Long Room at Trinity, and in the National Library, and at the city desk of *The Irish Times* there would be spreading the news that herself, the wild goose Cohalen example had arrived, and, having struck up an attitude of grand repose, was installed in the company of her paramour, the Tommy crooner who sounded like a cross between McCormack and Schumann-Heink, *moreiar*, in the uppermost sanctum of the rookery on O'Connell Street. (There being no necessity to hold a press conference to impart information to the town, Orphrey had charged the pair to be at the ready at half-seven to be transported up to Jammet's for dinner at eight, and then off at half-nine for the ten o'clock opening of the second half at the Olympia, featuring Aodghan Moon's comical turn as the Washerwoman of Ballsbridge, and then supper at Farrell's, in the *chambre séparée* [the snug, closed off by folding, although not soundproof doors] and afterwards a little private soirée, and—gathering momentum—had barreled out into the suddenly newly-minted, brilliantly clear late afternoon.)

From the long windows they watched the tricolor of the Republic of Ireland, unfurled and billowing—without fear, without reproach—atop the General Post Office building. Clouds lounged in a blue sky and sunlight splashed like Danaë's gold in oak-leaf patterns across the façades of the thoroughfare, as more and more citizens emerged.

He touched her hair.

"Still away?"

"It's just that I've been thinking . . ."

"And that leads to . . ."

"It all seems *ridiculous*!"

"Before filming even starts?"

"Avoidance is a mistake; it always was."

"Eh?"

"Gennaio—also Percase."

"Lovely, but what does it mean? Don't do it in front of the children? *En garde*? Mush?"

"Why don't we go out. I know my way around."

"The fact is you want to put on that enormous hat."

Mawrdew Czgowchwz swept her fabulous hair up into an arrangement and framed her face in a wide-brimmed "tell-tale" cloche, a Theophile Plafond "serious attitude" creation she had let Consuelo and Cégèste talk her into at the hat rack at Bendel's one afternoon in April during her convalescence.

"Glorious hat."

"You're a boon companion—no mistake."

"In spite of being an English juvenile."

"Bite your tongue, before I do."

Moments later they walked into O'Connell Street and turned left.

On how many countless days, she thought, had she breezed through the revolving doors and down the steps of the Plaza in New York, to turn either left—toward the Park, toward Magwyck, toward the galleries—or right—toward the shops, toward MoMA, the Rialto, the opera house, or Arpenik's—or just to go along anywhere at all, crossing streets randomly as the lights turned—to the boat basin, to the factory district—alone, canvassing New York and marveling. Now, at forty years of age, stepping out in company with the very lately appointed one, into this very town, the city in which she'd been conceived, marveling at the outcome, and yet wary . . .

There across the street on Easter Monday in the year of their Lord 1916, while politically naïve patrons queued up at the Gaiety for the opening night performance of *The Gondoliers* by the D'Oyly Carte Opera, on a pavement along which now lustily grousing frequenters of the city center and the walk up Nelson's Pillar paraded, her father, Jan Vaclav Motivyk, a Bohemian philosopher-prince, the most perfectly

beautiful man in Western Europe, had been gunned down by some British slug (news that had come late to her). Wandering for forty years through the hallways of fear and isolation, through a personal triumph over distracting *réclame*, she'd missed a lot (on the face of it at least). She felt she had slept through the 20s and the 30s, and the Czegowchwzian's watchword "The 40s never ended," dismayed her. It was one thing for Plafond and Lily Daché to continue manufacturing gallant hats, but this *was* 1956. Another election was coming up in the United States. Eruptions were about in Poland and Hungary. The *Andrea Doria* lay sunk into a reef in the Atlantic off Manitoy, Jackson Pollock had died a violent death, and the Metropolitan Opera debut of Maria Meneghini Callas was scheduled to take place on October 28th. She would go on as Norma. She was not yet 33. Shape up or ship out, old girl . . .

"Eh?"

"How old did you say you were?"

"I never said. You know quite well how old I am. Your cronies discovered: I'm 33."

"On April Fool's. Some year '23. The Meneghini woman, de los Angeles, you . . ."

"And you chose me."

"On the face of it at least."

"On the *what*?"

"That's the place over there where they shot my da."

"Cast a cold eye—come along."

"Don't brood: It's trashy to brood."

"Whither can be asinine."

"Come, I'll show you where the Abbey stood."

"That's the ticket. How did you first meet Orphrey Whither?"

"No, we have not."

"I was merely curious."

"He came around to the Gaiety to catch my Katisha—that long ago. Proposed at that time a film on the life of Lola Montes. Said he had dipped into pots of the filthiest money on earth—ancient pirate family. We talked about perform-

ing. I said an opera about Lola Montes . . . I'd propose it to Creplacx. Miro wasn't interested. Whither's tone-deaf, sad to say. Anyway, Max Ophuls is making Lola Montes, and we're making *Pilgrim Soul*. Well, perhaps."

They walked out the front gate of Trinity College into the Dublin traffic.

"Not a bad town to come from."

"You like it here?"

"It has a look; it's kept its wells in working order."

"I've got to live in New York."

As they walked up Grafton Street, looking at the shops, the angelus rang out. Many citizens nodded in one direction, touched crooked forefingers to their foreheads and capbrims, moving their lips.

"I want to show you the Gaiety at the top of the street."

"Wonderful, I've never heard an account of your Dublin career."

"It was very peculiar."

The stage door porter at the Gaiety not only remembered the diva Mawrdew Czgowchwz as well as himself in his right mind, but had himself only just come in from Johnny Farrell's in the passage behind the theater itself, where the whole talk of the afternoon (still ongoing from the apprehensive talk of the previous day: "Aw, whisha, would yiz tell me . . .") was of the re-arrival of this daughter of the sainted and immortal Great Flaming Maev Cohalen. Sensible and courteous, as well as pleased with himself to have his guests all to himself, Mike Riordan slipped the couple in through the pass door that leads to the stage and walked them out onto the apron under the proscenium arch, and, retiring to his post and to his private pint, left them there with their thoughts.

Standing by the empty stage in the darkened theater, smitten by recollections, Mawrdew Czgowchwz attempted to convey to her mate some notion of what it had been like playing in *Aïda* on that stage, roughly half the size of the new stage at the Mawrdew Czgowchwz Theater on Manitoy,

where together they had sung *NOIA* just seven weeks before.

"Lord, that Triumphal Scene—madness and mayhem! They had about a hundred supernumeraries, in motley and cellophane, just marching around in twin circles, clockwise and counterclockwise across the stage, and out around into the alley past the windows of Farrell's snug, and back again across the stage. Need I tell you what transpired—the slapstick collisions and the belting back of the Tullamore against the perishin' *could* in the alley—quid's-worths passed out the snug windows like it was the dispensary at the Hall of Healing, *moreiar!*

"During the Nile Scene wasn't it impossible to keep them out of Johnny's altogether, and they would by then be breaking into ribald ballads about Little Egypt and the Slave's Dilemma by the river Nile, and 'Ole Man River' and whatnot else you could hear all the way across Stephen's Green—which was nothing to yours truly, but the poor *Aïda*, a misguided lyric called Serafina *qualcosa* . . . They'd generally calm down by the time of the Judgment Scene, or else the Madge would dash 'round and light into them with the prop cat o' nine tails they had me brandishing at the poor *qualcosa* in the Boudoir Scene—'*Trema vil' schiava* . . . *In cor ti lessi* . . .' It was that strange. I sang the whole of the Radames duet as a sort of *descant* against the offstage sound of the ruckus we used to pretend was a spontaneous uprising of the disgruntled masses of Memphis, Egypt. That was how I met Achille Plouque, by the by. He'd come over at the eleventh hour, apologizing he only knew Radames in French. 'Sure man, y' could sing it in *Choinese*, fer ahl the difference it'd make altogether.' He ended up singing it in Ersatz. We did *Samson and Delilah* too . . .

"Lord, will I ever forget the *Samson*! I spent the entire evening in repose, lounging over there downstage under a canopy. Never budged, while everybody else danced around upstage as though the whole shebang were Delilah's dream floor show. Samson came and went like a rube sent to a fortuneteller on a carny midway, or like some major-domo paying a business call on a rug dealer in old Gaza. The *poule de*

luxe bedchamber became in the *Goin' To Town* act the Temple of Dagon, I give you . . . And I never shifted my weight around on my bones. They rolled the presence upstage on casters—for all the world the way Ralph used to kid about moving Bagatelli around in *Gioconda*—and draped me in this, I mean *cheap*, tiger-print throw that smelled like the dromedary's saddle at the Cincinnati zoo . . .

“Plonque sang Don José as well. The whole of *Carmen* was *stained* on assorted flats that did not always contrive to match up, so that one wound up, for example, being gashed open in public against the panorama of a mountain pass that looked anyway particularly like the postcard of the Wicklow hills on sale outside the General Post Office, into which a collection of shawlies had wandered, smoking cigars, after looting a remnant sale on the quais, or singing ‘Chanson Bohème’, as if selling tobacco, in the middle of the Four Courts, which is what they drew Seville to look like.”

“All sounds rather varsity.”

“So it was, I promise you. But *The Mikado* I'll have you understand was a very classy affair, because Sybilla insisted, and saw to it, and the whole come-all-ye out front sang along at every single performance, and I enjoyed Katisha immensely. They let me have my head, and do a sort of *Turandot* farrago I fudged up from looking at old snaps of Evaline Tablowe, in the middle of ‘Bow, bow, to the daughter-in-law elect,’ that turns out to have been rather prophetic. We did have fun.”

“Then as now.”

“Yes, then as now.”

They spent some further time looking the theater over, until they noticed Mike Riordan, returned as far as the proscenium arch stage left, offhandedly scuffing his foot and swinging his leg in *demi-caractère*, looking up to heaven after clusters of stars that were not fixed there, employing freestyle sign language to convey urgent advice: the prompt sociables would at any instant be rolling in off King Street and crowding the stalls bar for the pre-show buffet and drink, and if the friends intended keeping their appointments in public that

evening, they might care to fortify themselves by popping across into the snug at Johnny Farrell's then and there. Indicating they would not, and thanking him, they left the theater.

"Had a pleasant afternoon?"

Over dinner at Jammet's, they told Orphrey Whither of their great excursion.

"A most curious people, though I say it of my own. You know, don't you, what Caesar said? 'They are forever running about the country looking for news, and they are mortally afraid of their druids.' Let us drink to the success of *Pilgrim Soul*."

"A Celtic allegory," Mawrdew Czegowchwz said, suspiciously.

"Your mother will lay on the allegory," Whither pronounced, winking across at Jacob Beltane. "You'll have the time of your life. It's done a day at a time. Tomorrow for example, all you must endure is sitting at a piano in a Georgian drawing room playing at playing a Field nocturne—that one in E-flat major—looking just the way you do tonight, askance, whilst *he* gazes at you across a crowded room." Turning his head to Jacob, he directed, "You're merely to stand out of the shot *gazing* at her, there's a good man."

"I have a wee small question," Mawrdew Czegowchwz interposed, experimenting with Irish vowels. "Who, apart from this gorgeous man whom all animals desire, gazes back enraptured—in your mind's enormous eye, that is to say—who's been cast as Motivyk?"

"Good woman, eat up your greens."

"I get it; it's like the Met. I meet him in the wings. '*In bocca di lupo*!' "

"I'm waiting for the right moment to spring him on you."

"I recognize that; it's called 'meeting cute.' "

"You know too much."

"I don't know the half of it."

"Lie back and think of Ireland."

"You're all daft, and it's my scalp. It's *me* that's the great horse's arse up there on that screen!"

The mood accelerated. Whither explained that the leading man, one Patrick More, a *jeune premier* at the Old Vic, would be joining their company directly he came out of the current run in the Waterloo Road as Trofimov in *The Cherry Orchard*. (“*Destined*, my darlings, the boy’s right *destined*!”—Michael Yew, in prophecy.) For then they must bide their time.

Lieutenant publican Wee-John Farrell (“The next and last”), mainstay since that June night in 1944 when the elder John, then aged 79, took “an episode for himself” and pitched forward down the cellar stairs: a seeming installation into eternity, only to bolt back upright on a pallet in the surgery to report “a vast to-do, with nobody callin’ *toime*,” pulled on his pint, while reckoning his turf accounts. In the surrounding locale, glowing brass fixtures and fittings, worked oak-wood long bar and tables, inlaid and stained leather-topped side room tables, and long oval mirrors composed a setting that quivered in the dim gold light of the late evening situation, whose standard “Tomorrow may, tomorrow . . .” superintended the cessation of need and fret, as citizen met citizen in company, seeking consolation, corroboration, and comfort—to tell lies and to celebrate credence.

Entering the premises, Mawrdew Czgowchwz stepped back into one crowded room of her mother Maev Cohalen’s world and time. There was not an empty table in it, nor even a corridor of available floor, nevertheless the crowd parted as she stood on the top step of the drop of three leading down into the lounge. Jacob stood to one side and observed: as if someone had released a spinning top and thrown it into the cleared alley in the palpable light, so the Dubliners rallied. Orphrey led the way to a cleared table as the invisible spinning top broke apart amid murmurs and the actual conference began.

“Do you prefer to be called Miss Cohalen or Madame Czgowchwz?”

“The latter, if the former doesn’t object. It is the billing—except that ‘Miss’ is preferable, I think, don’t you, after all?”

"May we take it therefore that you've endured what's called an Identity Crisis?"

"We'd both been around the block, in opposite directions, and had never met, if that's what you mean. Is it, or not?"

"You're now evolving singly?"

"In case you think it's easy . . . I have a boon companion." She looked at Jacob and smiled. "You aren't unaware of him?"

"You are well so?"

"One seems to be on the way, on the mend—which is the drill, is it not, in fact?"

"What are your impressions of the capital?"

"Oh, many and various. Perhaps you'd care to come up and see them some time?"

"Do you have a favorite air?"

" 'The Last Rose of Summer'. Is that too predictable?"

"How do you feel about playing your mother, a legend, on the screen?"

"It's apt to make one a bit *flabulach*, isn't it?"

"And what is it you hope to gain for yourself by the endeavor?"

"The Academy Award."

From above they heard three thuds, and the ceiling lighting fixture quivered slightly. *Where have I heard that before?* Mawrdew Czgowchwz asked herself, as if somebody had walked over her grave.

As if in a holiday pantomime a wand had been waved, the commotion in the room stopped short. After moments of silence, a light appeared in the doorway at the top of the narrow back stairs, and, alone and unsupported, the proprietor himself came down step by step in his own person to greet and be received by his illustrious and alluring guest: a signal honor, according to the report of common memory, accorded no prior person other than the President of the Republic (for his pains and courtesy to Irishry).

Rubicund Johnny Farrell, garbed in dun tweeds in the fashion of the turn of the century, collared in cellulose, sporting a dark green silk tie, waistcoated as well, and fingering

the gold watch he checked in a swift glance against the bar-room wall clock, approached the Whither dais.

" 'Tis she, then, the daughter that was?"

"That was, that is," Mawrdew Czgowchwz replied. "Who are you?"

There were audible gasps from every corner.

"I'm Johnny Farrell, gel, that's *who*!"

"When you're at home."

"That's right, then, and there it is."

"This must be the right place, sure."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph: the muther *incarnate*!"

More than just a suspensory pause occurred.

"D'y'sing?"

"I have done."

"Twister! 'Twas yerself they tell me in the *opra* next door by the Gaiety—was it a Tuesdeh, or a leftover Mondeh, when was it, year before last?"

"Some years ago, they tell me."

"Is it *yew* needs t'know so?"

"It is."

"Were y'daft, so?"

"I wasn't well in me health."

"Year before last?"

"Some years ago."

"They don't vary."

"The Countess Madge O'Meaghre Gautier informs me we have met."

"And would ye be speakin' now of Mary Magdalen O'Meaghre?"

"Undoubtedly the same gel."

"I knew her da. Can y'sing still, or d'ye disremember how?"

"I can sing if you've the tune."

"Yer muther wuz a twister loike yerself."

"Y'don't say."

"I do say—I knew the gel. You yerself do be soundin' loike a bloody Yank!"

"Then I'll sing the song she sang in Philadelphia, Boston

and New York raising money for the Fenian crusade."

"An' that she sang in here the nought she got yew."

"It's 'Macushla', isn't it?"

"Dats a ting, neow, annybody cewd look up."

"I hear it still goes like . . ."

Jacob sat writing in his journal an account of the evening, while Mawrdew Czegowchwz sat up in bed reading a long letter, with a longer enclosure, from Jameson O'Maurigan in New York, that had arrived in the late afternoon post.

"He told you to go to sleep."

"He told me to go to bed; I've gone to bed."

"In point of fact he told you to go to bed and take a pill; I heard it all."

"What he told me was to go to bed and take a pill and a quid's-worth of Tullamore. He clearly knows what he wants to turn up on the set tomorrow morning, but what he wants and what he's going to get are two different stories."

"What's the story in New York?"

"Enough to make me get on a plane tomorrow morning, that's what."

"New York is where you belong . . ."

October 29, 1956

Magwyck (The Snug)

My dearest Mawrdew Czegowchwz,

The Meneghini has sung. More about that later: it was more than just an occasion.

I shall be leaving for Manitoy tomorrow, and will not come to New York again until January, except to hear M.M.C. in *Lucia* (I *hate* it so!) and *Tosca* (I can't bear it) and perhaps to meet with her, as you have suggested. The publicity has been distracting. *Time* (cover), Dolores, Gargantua herself, taking a stand, disgustingly, against. Johnny Donovan shrieking across tables at Chambord (*ipse dixit*

Trixie G.). The rest . . .

Having turned *Pilgrim Soul* over to you both, I must try to make something out of *Panache*, that play I told you about wherein—if she takes a shine to it—La Bridgewood will be playing Death's Own Head. I need a fresh new face to play her victim. It's all based on a Hawthorne story—the old buzzard and I have the same birthday, and I am technically an American (a New York American!). For a fresh new face I look at the duds ads in *The Sunday Times Magazine*. As G-G ever so wisely says: "When you wake up in the morning, and you don't know what you want, ask an ad."

You realize that Tansy Percase is a secret holdout Meneghini nay-sayer. I heard him refer to the voice the other night—twixt thee and me—as "corrosive and corroded beyond application." Course he was drunk, and wailing at Consuelo, whose opinion, held in check . . .

What can I tell you about the motion picture except that it is the art form, essentially, of gorgeous women suffering. What Mr. B. says about the ballet goes double for the motion picture. Which is to say that every man on the screen is the double of a woman. All the men on the screen want to fuck all the women and all the men into one stupor. Excuse me for daring to speak to you this way, but you made me grow up fast last spring, and I will soon be well into my second quarter-century—which I think I'll not complete. I see me dead by forty—probably by '70. Thrillingly individuated, but dead. I'll write my epitaph this day and entrust it to your memorial care: Nothing happens at parties!

Remember *Intolerance*. Remember *Dark Victory* and *Now, Voyager*. Remember *Gone With The Wind* (whyever not). Think of and thank *All That Heaven Allows*, and always and forever *Les Enfants du Paradis*. ("L'amour est tellement simple.")

What is there to say about *Vissi D'Arte* (except "enclosed find"). Ralph loudly and absolutely disclaims authorship. It looks like the old bag did it (in

her spare time).

I'm seeing Laverne tonight. Could I fall in love a second time with a diva woman?

All right, I can't not talk about it for another breath. She was as good as you are. She hasn't got quite your *féerique* dimension. I don't imagine Melisande would interest her at all. But I have never, not even from you, heard emotional deprivation voiced with more volcanic anguish. At white heat she's the end of the known world. The voice itself (*qua*) is molten, acidic. The intensity of the musical genius is forbidding, like radioactive fallout, in contrast to your prescriptive, healing energies. She could make me lose my mind, were it not lost. So there.

The big Z. came up to me (Maisie Halloran in tow). "Vot do you tink of *dot*, den?" I said what I just told you, in the short form. "Veh! How dey *forget*! I'm sending a *telegram* to report you!" "Don't bother, Madame, I'm confessing. How could I live with myself and keep such a secret?" "You Irishers can do *anything* crazy, for instance svitch allegiance." "I'm not switching allegiance." "Heh!" "Did you feel I'd switched allegiance when Mawrdew Czgowchwz came to New York?" "In view uv subsequent developments, dot vuz an entirely different ting!" (This last was spoken "darkly," and I almost still don't get it. I seem to remember she cut us all in public for a year after you hit town—even *though* you were a mezzo diva.) Ralph said "Meanwhile, that *she* died on G in '54 in the Normas!" I remember thinking it was the politics—what *were* the politics in the 40s?

But I digress. The Meneghini woman. Yes, well, as they say on your side of the Big Pond: there it is and there you are. You wanna talk musical? She understands what you understand about rhythm. She does her count—no, she lets the count do her—so it seems veiled utterance, at once always and never marked. She sometimes sounds absolutely like a coyote—and that's amazing. She knows *Norma*

inside out and sideways, particularly sideways. (A controversial discussion got itself going up in Sherry's over Norma and motherhood. One or two loons kept on how you had to have been a mother, and three or four more about how you absolutely didn't, and in point of fact should never have been, so the compensatory—I give you, cold on a slab. They cited Ponselle and Z. as non-moms, and thee and Neri as women who have conceived [q.v. the enclosed tale of woebegone divadom]. I thought Ralph would choke to death on rage and spit. In my experience it is the first time in history that you and the old foghorn have ever been mentioned in the same file, except as members of the cast of *Aïda*.)

Aftermaths and post-mortems. Overhead on the line today: X: "Well, were you *moved*?" Y: "Yes, I wuz deah. I wuz so moved they had to move me back!" I've got lots more to declare, but for now suffice to say that everything you said was true, and still is, and the only thing remaining to be done about it (at least before the Pope opens the letter in 1960, q.v. *passim*) is to put the two of you together in something and charge a hundred dollars a seat to raise cash to elect the first president who likes to go to the opra. *Maria Stuarda* (alternating principals)? *Bohème*? *Les Troyens*? *Frau*? (She don't do German though, save in reduced versions of *Tristan* and *Parsifal*.) Poulenc's Carmelite vaudeville? *Herodiade*? Yes, that's it, *Herodiade*—alternating the mother who wants to be the daughter and vice versa. Speaking of which yet again, the mother business chez M.M.C. is a mess. (Mother business always is. Excuse me for daring to speak to you this way . . . I love you more than ever. You want to make a life. Do. I swear to you on my mother's watery grave, all may be well.)

In the meantime, best of luck with *Pilgrim Soul*.

Your pal,
Sean Darragh

Brushing a tear aside, Mawrdew Czegowchwz picked up the enclosure in Jameson's letter.

Vissi D'Arte

The Memoirs of Morgana Neri, as confided to "Oroviso"
"Sempre, con fê sincera . . ."

As I look back through the years here as I am sitting content in my Sicilian lime tree orchard in my own Villa Morgana in the lavender hills outside the city of Catania in my majestic *paese*, Sicilia, in summer, I am serene. There's an old song I love and it's called "Smilin' Through." So be it. Back here in the home of my beloved Bellini after so many wonderful fleeting years that it seems like yesterday only that I passed them in the Home of the Brave it makes me *poco triste*, however not *morboso*, but then as I see the Book of My Life and reading it over I consider that I must follow the good example of the great artists of yesteryear and offer *il mio testimonio, Il mio difficile vangelo . . .*

Jacob looked across the room at her. "What are you gasping about? Has somebody murdered somebody back in the big bad town?"

"Keep watch. It may suddenly become necessary to summon room service."

The way I see it I have lived my life but I do not even yet in middle age (let's face it) begin to comprehend the message of the same *stessa vita*. Let me not get too deep here because for the most part this life of mine has been a loose garment, much like the life of the *farfaletta*—a ball as they say in the States. But then it is a fleeting thing, is Fame (and I was *there* at the *top*, kids) and as to my Fame—*siatele*: so be it, and I have with *umiltà* endured it, for it can be a thing of torment to wake up in the night like as not and you buy the moments of *gloria* all dearly and I have had more than my lioness's share I can tell you. I see that my story is really like a tape you play on a tape recorder (and there are tapes of me and my music

that would stretch from here to the moon and back four times). This tape is really being played back to me through you, my “Oroviso” who are the father confessor and *pastore* of me and my every fan from the dearest little salesgirl who ever followed me around Sak’s Fifth Avenue and her like all across the Land of the Free, to those important stars of the theater and fashion and politics and restaurant owners—people that thronged my *camerino* as I never shut my doors anywhere for all those years only to sleep and dream of my duty to music and the operatic stage. They were, they are, all, my children. And tonight they throng the chambers of my heart for it grows dusk here in the lavender hills overlooking Catania and I am alone but never really for I have you all in my thoughts and prayers on my knees every night before God. Our great poet Dante says somewhere that “*nel mezzo del camin’ di nostra vita . . . etc.*” I’ve felt that way—lost and all. It’s no picnic, but things get better if you just hang on. The woods you know are symbolic in dreams and if you think symbolically you’ll make out. Cast your bread upon the waters and it comes back *pannetone*. And without any witch doctor head shrinkers either. Pray to God: He’ll tell you what. God is very symbolic. I was lucky, I have a voice. I have always considered singing a sacred art and knew from the beginning in my church days that I was destined. *La mia preghiera ai santi tabernacoli sali . . .* So be it. Of course there are times when I think of my voice as but a *don fatale*. I mean a great gift like this which is mine from God can make some wicked people hate you. They throw symbolic mud in your eye, so to speak. I never understood that. I never will. Maybe God does. God must. He would. Never mind, I am proud to be soprano and Sicilian, without any crazy fake designations, excuse me but these people know who they are, to be known for what I am. But let my playback continue, without *appoggiature*.

I first “chirped” when I was but four. “*Uccelina!*” my mother cried, who spoke the high Italian, being as she was from Tuscany, like Dante, where it snows every winter, who married my father Count Fabrizio Neri after a whirlwind courtship when they met in Vatican City (that it is now) on a pilgrimage to get an audience from Pope Pius X (a saint). I often think of that word “audience” and its destined place in my life to come. There was also my little brother Arturo—

more about him later. (He's finally found himself.) (God is the best judge of "when.")

From then on it was music music music and more music. I'm no snob, I'll sing anything (almost) but this new junk they're grinding out! I mean there are sounds around today you don't ever want to *hear* much less *make*! You could *die* from certain sounds being made *this moment* as I speak. Let others sing this garbage, I'm sorry, and butcher their voices (such as they are, let's face it). I'll stick to my beloved Bellini. Even so there are women singing *Norma* today who should in the sacred name of music and for the sake of the race be—never mind: I speak my piece to the wind. (The wind is the voice of God in words without syllables.) But I too have been bitten by the winds of contemporary change as Bellini would have understood, but more about that later, not that it's any secret. I always say, A woman is as sick as her secrets and Tell all for the good of mankind. My life is an open book and here it is.

I made my debut at the Teatro Bellini right here in Catania. I was the maid Anina in *La Traviata*. (You could look all this up; I'm not the kind that's ashamed to tell the truth and make up stories, like some who have been out to get me all my life long.) Many years later I was offered a new production of this war-horse opera of Verdi. They wanted me of course for Violetta, but I never could stomach playing sick women. I'm a feminist diva. I steered clear from Mimi also. My motto, taken from the Countess my mother (not that other sap Mozart wrote about) is, "If you're a woman be a strong woman." I sang *Norma* and *Turandot* and *Aïda*. (I mean you couldn't call those girls weak or sick, just a little mixed up on account of men and who isn't—I'll admit it.) I've had my high and my low notes in life I can tell you.

Then I sailed to New York City. A friend of Mr. Francis Robinson's heard me and sent them a wire: *Ecco la nuova Ponselle*. Years later I met cara Rosa and God be good to her in her old age she agreed. ("The other people, Morgana, they're not *musicians*. God knows what they do to make their noise!") I got to New York in summer and I went down to Mulberry Street and for a while through a distant cousin I sang in the San Gennaro Festival and got to know the real people which I have always preferred as is well known by them all.

I even waited table. I'm not ashamed to say it: this is America, right? It was also at this time that I met the sainted woman La Principessa Orianna Incantevole who was over for the summer as a guest of the great Madame Olive Middleton, the English diva and bel canto specialist. These women enchanted me and I never looked back or even sideways all during the unfortunate war that was meanwhile all a terrible mistake and a mishandling of publicity and kept my faith in music. I made my historic Met debut singing the High Priestess in *Aïda* in the afternoon and the tragic (as I see it) Kate Pinkerton in the evening. Next morning I was reading the rave reviews of this feat given to me by Luigi Francobilli, the dean of opera critics who said "I have never in this life heard the unbearably poignant phrase '*Potete perdonarmi, Butterfly?*' rendered with more poignant expression," and I received an ecstatic call from the prominent restaurant owner and politician Settimo Ottaviani who said it was the greatest thing he ever heard over the radio, that High Priestess—that in a crazy way it brought him to his knees before God (The Real God, not that idol Ptah) and the rest is history for *readers*, *I married him*. The next week I sang my first *Aïda* and I was on the elevator to the stars as somebody said. What with singing and war work life seemed to pass in a dream. Then tragedy. *Mio adorato* Settimo disappeared on a secret U.S. Government mission into the hills of this our beloved Sicilia and was never seen or heard of again. He was carrying my picture as the *Forza Leonora*. I lost the child that summer. This is hard for me to talk of but I do believe that out of that dark time I did emerge the greater artist and that my records are my children. Know what I mean?

The trouble with Mussolini was he never would leave well enough alone. I knew that Petacci woman slightly. *Dio mio quella cattiva di qual gente!* But let it pass and live in the now as they say. They came to me with an idea about an opera can you believe it on that one and I said to them "*fa via!*" in my Butterfly manner. Now there's a role! I was the best Butterfly in the business for a generation. Tramontini, that god, said I was the only one that got all the vowels right ("*Sì, sì, per la vita*" for example) and no Viennese scooping. Those were the days. *Addio senza rancor*. (Even though I never sang those words I always liked the sentiment especially when my ador-

able friend Licia sang them. God bless her she carries on whereas I'm more in the tradition of Ponselle if you know what I mean. Whatever makes you happy.) People used to call me the Merry Widow of Thirty-ninth Street. I was always looking up.

Sometime around this time something happened that has been the excuse for a lot of noise and I don't mean to stir up a pot of old sauce but just to set things down for the record my mother had a cousin Fiorenza who married a poor but honest Calabrese beneath her station called Enzo Cedrioli and Enzo and Fiorenza had a beautiful daughter Mary after they came to the States and Mary became in the course of due time my most devoted fan. This isn't the time to go into it but there have been some pretty ugly rumors spread around New York about poor Mary and how she lost her marbles as they say. In my opinion it was that crazy diet she went on. *Never eat just bananas!* I pray for her every every night. Meanwhile I think it's time I told you what's cooking in Catania. You remember Arturo? Arturo lived for many years in the shadows as he is now the first to admit. (*"A l'ombra di Morgana"* is what he says if you want to know the truth.) But I pointed out to him last week that the shadow cast by even the standing figure of poor frail me was just really symbolic of The Shadow. I guess you know what I mean. Be that as it may the good news is that Arturo is about to deliver after sixteen years the fruit of his conception that came to him in the winter of 1940 after he came out of the fever state he was in from the long Abyssinian campaign (and the full story of *that* is yet to be told in the papers)—Arturo's opera *LEI*. After much soul-searching and prayer I have consented to return to the lyric stage to create Essa-Lei, a complicated woman. I can't tell you too much about it except that next to *The Greatest Story Ever Told* it is in my opinion the greatest story ever told. I play the Eternal Female Principle and I can tell you also there are D-flats. Negotiations with La Scala are in the works as they say as I speak. SO look for the big SHE in '57. The completion of *LEI* is a genuine miracle. You may have heard the story. Arturo was sailing back to New York to clear out the apartment at the Ansonia. He was on the *Andrea Doria*. He remembers he was working furiously as usual on the transformation scene. (He says he still hasn't got it right. But I say

there is a time to put out no matter what. And anyway it's my job to put it over and we'll have many rehearsals.) He says he remembers working away on the phrase "*Son io stessa, Lei*" and hearing in the still night the ship's orchestra playing that terrible "*Arrivederci, Roma*" and people singing offkey and the next thing—well, Arturo believes it was a judgment, but the rest is his story and let me not barge in and tell it for him. (It's just that I learned in my musical art how to tell a story—there's a method.) Be that as it may the rest is history such as the dramatic rescue in which Arturo forever gallant almost lost it all, *LEI* included. But God had other plans and who am I to say no? A promise is a promise and I promised myself, and although I promised myself a serene retirement there are promises and promises. *Teneste la promessa*. (Licia coming through again!) My original promise was to La Musica and to The Theatre. And after all who else should ever sing it first? Am I right? Well now you know. Have I got my work cut out for me! Fittings, interviews, getting into character which for me is a thing as long as a pregnancy *and vastly more important*. Yes for me next to playing Eve or the Virgin Mary (both of which I have turned down—you should have heard *that* music!) this is the most challenging woman I have ever heard of. You'll think so too when we're through. And don't you worry about those D-flats. I always said a D-flat is just a C with big ideas. God is with me, here and now. One thing worries me a little. They call her "She Who Must Be Obeyed" and I don't care for ordering people around. I always think that where there's a will there's a way and that way is the way of St. Francis. So it's going to be a little difficult for me to come to grips with this woman. I said to Arturo "What are you after with this woman?" And he tells me that he wants to outdo *Lulu* but in a more religious way. I said that's a good thing you said religious or at least sacred. (Even if it is basically a story about a lot of Hottentots and an Amazon from Outer Space: that's my interpretation but I'm not giving any more away. You'll have to come to Scala.) Because that *Lulu* thing is just plain disgusting. I mean he couldn't even finish it. He was obviously so guilty to write music like that and to kill not only the poor woman who is supposed to sing it but also the people out front, as I said before, but God rest him in his grave he was obviously a very unhappy person.

Also about the costumes. I see a lot of pale blue chiffon and I was thinking along those lines (if you'll pardon my playful sense of figures of speech and remember that English though I dearly love it *is* my second language be that as it may and all). I was thinking that we might have a little contest to design the costumes and we could limit the entries to regulars at the standing room line at the Metropolitan because from what I hear there isn't a lot to listen to over there except records. (Just kidding: Scala has some great designers.)

Poor Mary Cedrioli. But for the record I'd better go back now to how it all started which was just after the Russians took over in Eastern Europe and the dread Iron Curtain fell so close to us here in free Italia and so dangerous to the freedom of all people in the Free World not just Catholics and opera lovers. Arturo, who has been in the confidence of musical circles for forty years swears that in Prague during the war when the only decent Germans there were trying to hold the line against the infiltration into Bohemia of Russian agents that a secret pact was made whereby a woman trained in espionage and *posing as the opposite* would be transmitted to the outside world in the disguise of an *opera diva*. The Vatican at that time had ways of finding out things that for a lot of obvious reasons if you know anything about the Seal of Confession *nobody can talk about*, but we do know that part of this plan was to infiltrate into a *convent* and find someone who because of some terrible secret in their past could be persuaded to do the work of the Russians. Terrible things have happened because of these revelations that I am not allowed to reveal further, but *these people know who they are and so do we*.

Poor Mary Cedrioli sits in that mental institution and God is good even if His Ways are not to be understood. All we can say for sure is that the Holy Father still has not opened The Letter. Some say he will in 1960 and that will be *it*. There are days when you wonder what you are even doing let me tell you planning new productions at La Scala, but until we hear otherwise life goes on. And that's the drill, as they say in Inghilterra.

One day in 1947 Mary Cedrioli came to see me and said "Madame I never fool around with fortunetellers, but we have this old biddy the Irish left behind downtown and she told me

to tell you that there's a red-headed woman . . ."

"What?"

"What 'what'?"

"It trails off!"

"What trails off, then?"

"This manuscript!"

"I do wish you'd go to sleep."

"You have got to read this, *now!*"

"I'm composing a memoir."

"This fits right in."

"Go to sleep, I'll catch you up. I'm in the middle of everything."

"I need to read it again."

"No, you do *not*. Give it here. And go to sleep!"

Soundly asleep, she dreamed a Night-Sea Journey.

Drifting along in a rococo hammock nestled deep in the *felze* of a Venetian gondola adrift in the Boat Lake in Central Park, behind the back of the Angel of the Waters, alone, with no cohorts in attendance but for Jacob, the gondolier up top, singing, in Italian, the sailor's chantey that opens *Tristan und Isolde*:

*Ci spinge il vento
All patria suol;
D'Irlanda O figlia
Dove vai tu?*

Under Bow Bridge, around the bend of the Ramble promontory, and suddenly into a cove that had never been there before, through an open cave like the cave at Tintagel (names carved on the tunnel's walls), the current carrying them westward under the Dakota into one of Manhattan's forgotten tributary streams, spilling them minutes later into the Hudson and down past the Cunard, French Line, North German-Lloyd and Holland-American Line piers, down past the Circle Line and the abandoned Hoboken ferry terminal,

down past freighters docked at the Greenwich Village and lower North River piers, past The Battery and out into The Narrows. Past the Statue of Liberty (Mae West singing "*Ah, responds, responds à ma tendresse! Verse-moi, verse-moi l'ivresse*") and out into a dead calm Atlantic.

All across the Atlantic, six days and seven nights, they passed the *Arcadia* on its East-West crossing, and waved.

They sailed past Connemara, past Cobh. "I want to sail up to Dublin," Mawrdew Czgowchwz called out to the boatman. "They are waiting impatiently for me there!" "You are just about to remember a subsequent engagement!" the boatman called down, and rowed on singing.

Into the Bay of Biscay; past Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean. Past Barcelona, past Marseilles and the Chateau D'If. Past Corsica and Sardinia and into the Tyrrhenean Sea. Past Ogygia, where, on a golden wharf the nymph Calypso stood waving and calling out, "Dock, Mawrdew, dock—we need you!"

Through the Straits of Messina to Scylla and Charybdis. Suddenly there was Morgana Neri, draping wash on a rock in the sun at the edge of a crumbled villa, singing "*Io sono l'umile ancella del geni creator*." Opposite stood the towering figure of the dread Alex Hollenius looking down into a whirlpool and chanting "*Vengerkas! Vengerkas!* You sing through your . . . *Vengerkas!*"

Suddenly from a Spitfire fighter plane circling overhead, the clear voice of Sean Darragh Jameson O'Maurigan: a battle cry.

Ed egli aveva del culo fatto trombetta!

Morgana Neri and Alex Hollenius disappeared howling into the whirlpool.

Jacob commenced singing Cavalli under the pale Trinacrian full moon.

Lucidissima face . . .

They sailed up the Adriatic coast, past Otranto, Brindisi, Termoli, Ravenna.

Mawrdew Czgowchwz fell asleep in her dream and woke up just as they sailed past Chioggia. Vaporetto voices

chanted: *Lido! San Lazzaro d'Armeni! San Giorgio Maggiore! San Marco!*

They drifted under the *Ponte Sospiri* to the *Fondamenta della Fenice*. Jacob led the way into the theater, bearing the torch of ingress and protection. In the *camerino* of the Fenice were hung the costumes of all the roles Mawrdew Czegowchwz had ever sung. She saw herself, formerly, hanging up in each of them, like a series of mummies in the catacombs at Palermo. She cried out in her dream and the figures flew out of the costumes and swirled like Tiepolo subjects up a hole in the roof, leaving the costumes behind, rearranged into neat rows backstage. Mawrdew Czegowchwz, climbing into a black Fortuny recital gown, slung with ropes of baroque pearls, sleeves slashed in Venetian pink swerved out onto the stage of the Fenice, blazingly footlighted by a ring of torches, beyond which, Jacob advised, "Everyone you've ever known" stood, sat and lounged in stalls, banquettes and parterre boxes. She recognized Ghiringhelli of La Scala in a stage box, talking to the Nameless Martinet Capo of Thirty-ninth Street.

"*Vedi!*" she cried out, "*Il palco funesto!*"

Seven angels came onstage. Gabriel, Michael, Vadriel, Raphael, Camael, Zadchiel and Zaphkiel (the twins). Mawrdew Czegowchwz looked back to the stage box. Ghiringhelli and the Capo had disappeared. In their places she saw Girolamo Muzio and his descendant Claudia engaged in animated conversation. Throughout the theater the *crocchio ristretto* hummed in many languages.

"*Quelle vie de dog!*"

"*Ma dimi . . .*"

"*Sage mir, Josef, ist der Graf schon?*"

"*No mi diga!*"

"*Aber was hab ich getan das ich muss leiden so?*"

"Say what you will, he's no man's fool."

"*L'esprit est toujours la dupe du coeur.*"

"*Qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête.*"

"I'd heard he was out of work."

"It was, dear, a deep heart bruise!"

Mawrdew Czegowchwz cried out to the angels surrounding her. "How long must I put up with this?"

"It's . . ."

"Your . . ."

"Dime . . ."

"It's . . ."

"Your dream."

"Your dream."

She took a long breath and sang C-sharp in alt.

"*Dio mio!*" cried Girolamo Muzio.

"*E vero, caro,*" whispered Claudia Muzio wonderingly, "*e una voce immemorabile!*"

Mawrdew turned to the chorus of angels. "Hit it boys!"

Gabriel sang C.

Michael sang E.

Raphael sang F-sharp.

Vadriel sang G-sharp.

Camael sang A-sharp.

The twins sang the octave C.

"*Bè, grazie, ragazzi!*" Mawrdew Czegowchwz complimented them. Jacob reached out of the prompter's box and handed her a golden bough, whereupon she began to sing in her native tongue, the Irish . . .

The angels flew up to the gods to man the spotlights.

Mawrdew Czegowchwz woke from one dream into another. The auditorium of the Fenice had become the grand saloon of the *Arcadia*, sailing across to Mestre and the mainland, with everyone she'd ever known on it waving good-bye and sailing away. Mawrdew Czegowchwz and her consort were back in their gondola crossing the lagoon and entering the inland waterways. The Orient Express, with everyone she'd ever known on it passed over a viaduct overhead on its way back to Paris. They were all waving out the windows.

Through the *navigle* across the Veneto to Milan, and then underground into Alpine caves they drifted, surfacing again on the Rhine, down which they sailed past the Lorelei and into the North Sea. They crossed the North Sea and sailed past the Orkneys, past Donegal, down to the Shannon's

mouth. It was morning. Jacob sang "*Che puro ciel, che chiaro il sol!*" as they sailed up the Shannon and into the Liffey, past washerwomen beating out linens on the rocks and commenting on his song "Sure an' haven't ye heard it a deluge of times!" Mawrdew Czgowchwz said "It's up to me to wake me."

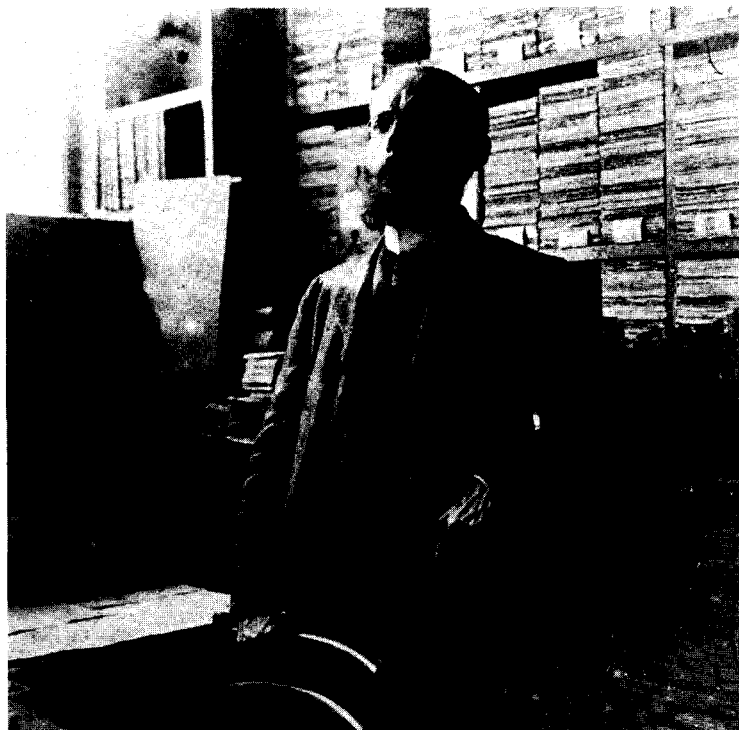
They arrived in the deserted capital and docked at O'Connell Bridge. They walked up O'Connell Street and into the Gresham, without incident. They took the lift to the top floor and entered their suite as they had done earlier that evening. Mawrdew Czgowchwz walked into the bedroom.

She looked down at herself and said, "There she lies, fast asleep, and posing as the opposite." She woke herself and sat up.

So here I am in Dublin in the pre-dawn of the second day the first day of the shooting God let it rain he wouldn't call it off he'd find a way and I've been sent for meanwhile to go to see the President out in Phoenix Park and speak to the nation over the radio I like it well enough to take a day off if Mr. Whither O Mr. Whither will that Mum 'tis fer the nation and another day off or more I must have to go down to the Wexford to-do and sing there but what am I to do between days off playing this part I'd rather live in my sleep with Jacob sounding so lovely and sailing all over the world time out of mind is what I want but he must sing here as well a little recital at Trinity the likes of him they've never heard in their pubs and alleys maybe in the Protestant cathedral close from the young boys but not like him with his trumpet F's G's A's and B's he'll knock them out of their pint pots and off their barstools and he doesn't snore just keeps breathing that slow way what's he dreaming nestled there not you can bet of rowing barges round the planet earth loaded with this one but more likely something English mist like changeable with showers in the late afternoon or Christmas in Norfolk or the pantomime or some deep thoughts like my father when he slept beside my mother when was it did they ever rest how can I play her that funny little old thing in the corner at Johnny Farrell's told me I've got to learn to spit because she

spat what was that joke in New York what is it you're saving up I'm saving up spit I should go out for a walk and figure this out but I'd wake him and he's had a hard day and a harder night doing all that rowing Gennaio certainly has taught me how to have telling dreams who can I tell where is Madge where are they all all with the Meneghini woman like as not but not likely unless they've succeeded in tearing her away from those reptile celebs like they did me god bless the Secret Seven and Consuelo and all of them for New York is so populated by so many of the wicked but never dull never a dull day or night no wonder Jameson has flown to Manitoiyo nevertheless what are they up to all of them I must have more letters back or I shall punish them upon my return what shall I do I shall retire from the Rialto and let them fight their own battles and go away to Vermont as I have never been there or to Iowa or Oregon or someplace in Nevada where they won't know me and I shall listen to the voice of the coyote whatever a coyote is and read the books they say they've all read and raise the child on a ranch not fence him in and learn to cook three meals a day while the men are out roping whatever it is but I know me I'd end up running a saloon for blood will out so here I am in Dublin.

Geoffrey Hill: An Homage to Charles Péguy



Charles Péguy dans son bureau.

Introductory Note

Charles Péguy was born in 1873 into a family of barely-literate peasants, to whom he subsequently devoted much eloquent homage, and died, an ageing infantry lieutenant of the Reserve, on the first day of the first Battle of the Marne in September 1914. He was a son of the people, of 'l'ancienne France', one of the last of that race as he conceived of it. His reputation, such as it was during his lifetime, was confined to a small intellectual elite: the few hundred readers of Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine, which he founded in 1900, and the

dozen or so who attended the Thursday meetings in his little bookshop, the 'Boutique des Cahiers', in the shadow of the Sorbonne. A man of the most exact and exacting probity, accurate practicality, in personal and business relations, a meticulous reader of proof, he was at the same time moved by violent emotions and violently afflicted by mischance. Like others similarly wounded, he was perhaps smitten by the desirability of suffering. 'Fils de vaincu, il est attiré par les défaites': such is the suggestion of Simone Fraisse; and a further remark, quoted by Halévy, 'Always, all through his life, this sound of broken glass,' felicitously evokes a variety of painful scenes: from the street-battles, the riotous fringe of 'L'Affaire Dreyfus' (that extraordinary collision of two kinds of patriotism, the one cynical, reactionary, the other regenerative and sacrificial) to the harsh severing of old alliances and friendships in the years that followed. A staunchly-committed Dreyfusard, Péguy was an admirer of the great socialist deputy Jean Jaurès throughout the period of the 'Affair'. By 1914 he was calling for his blood: figuratively, it must be said; though a young madman, who may or may not have been oversusceptible to metaphor, almost immediately shot Jaurès through the head.

Péguy had become a socialist during his college-days and remained one, though of an increasingly eccentric cast of thought and speech. T. Stearns Eliot, M.A. (Harvard), who made reference to Péguy's life and work in a series of university extension lectures in 1916, noted that he 'illustrates nationalism and neo-Catholicism as well as socialism', and treated his ideas in close association with those of Georges Sorel. It has been said that 'Péguy's socialism re-emerged as the national-socialism of Barrès and Sorel'; but fascism, in whatever form, is a travesty of Péguy's true faith and position. He did not, in the end, have a great deal in common with Sorel; quarrelled with him; was certainly not anti-semitic.

His brave and timely death in a beetroot field by the Marne transformed this much-snubbed, irascible man into the kind of figure-in-profile for whom church and civic dignitaries turn out in force, whose 'essential idea' even Ministers of Education may safely extol.

No one knows for certain whether he did, or did not, receive the sacrament on the Feast of the Assumption, shortly before he was killed. Estranged from the Church for a number of years, first by his militant socialist principles, then by the consequences of a secular marriage, he had, in 1908, rediscovered the solitary ardours of faith but not the consolations of religious practice. He remained self-excommunicate but adoring; his devotion most doggedly expressed in those two pilgrimages undertaken on foot, in June 1912 and July 1913, from Paris to the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres. The purpose of his first journey, as a tablet in the Cathedral duly records, was to entrust his children to Our Lady's care.

There is still a 'Boutique des Cahiers', a handy stone's-throw from the Sorbonne. Its appearance, at least on the outside, seems remarkably unchanged from that preserved by photographs taken in 1902 and 1913 except, of course, that there is now a plaque on the wall. John Middleton Murry, in his autobiography, affords 'a glimpse . . . through the windows of his little shop . . . of a man with a pince-nez set awry on his nose, tying up a parcel: that was Charles Péguy. I admired him, and admire him still.' In this vignette we too glimpse something of the tragicomic battered élan of Péguy's daily life. Murry's final cadence is without reservation, and I like him for such an expression of outright admiration. Péguy, stubborn rancors and mishaps and all, is one of the great souls, one of the great prophetic intelligences, of our century. I offer The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy as my homage to the triumph of his 'defeat'.

—G. H.

The Mystery of the Charity
of
Charles Péguy

*Nous sommes les derniers. Presque les après-derniers.
Aussitôt après nous commence un autre âge, un tout
autre monde, le monde de ceux qui ne croient plus à
rien, qui s'en font gloire et orgueil.*

Charles Péguy

1

Crack of a starting-pistol. Jean Jaurès
dies in a wine-puddle. Who or what stares
through the café-window crêped in powder-smoke?
The bill for the new farce reads *Sleepers Awake*.

History commands the stage wielding a toy gun,
rehearsing another scene. It has raged so before,
countless times; and will do, countless times more,
in the guise of supreme clown, dire tragedian.

In Brutus' name martyr and mountebank
ghost Caesar's ghost, his wounds of air and ink
painlessly spouting. Jaurès' blood lies stiff
on menu-card, shirt-front and handkerchief.

Did Péguy kill Jaurès? Did he incite
the assassin? Must men stand by what they write
as by their camp-beds or their weaponry
or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry?

Would Péguy answer—stubbornly on guard
among the *Cahiers*, with his army cape
and steely pince-nez and his hermit's beard,
brooding on conscience and embattled hope?

Truth's pedagogue, braving an entrenched class
of fools and scoundrels, children of the world,
his eyes caged and hostile behind glass—
still Péguy said that Hope is a little child.

Violent contrariety of men and days; calm
juddery bombardment of a silent film
showing such things: its canvas slashed with rain
and St Elmo's fire. Victory of the machine!

The brisk celluloid clatters through the gate;
the cortège of the century dances in the street;
and over and over the jolly cartoon
armies of France go reeling towards Verdun.

2

Rage and regret are tireless to explain
stratagems of the out-manoeuvred man,
the charge and counter-charge. You know the drill,
raw veteran, poet with the head of a bull.

Footslogger of genius, skirmisher with grace
and ill-luck, sentinel of the sacrifice,
without vantage of vanity, though mortal-proud,
defend your first position to the last word.

The sun-tanned earth is your centurion;
you are its tribune. On the hard-won
high places the old soldiers of old France
crowd like good children wrapped in obedience

and sleep, and ready to be taken home.
Whatever that vision, it is not a child's;
it is what a child's vision can become.
Memory, Imagination, harvesters of those fields,

our gifts are spoils, our virtues epitaphs,
our substance is the grass upon the graves.
'Du calme, mon vieux, du calme!' How studiously
one cultivates the sugars of decay,

pâtisserie-tinklings of angels ' 'sieur-'dame',
the smile of the dead novice in its plush frame,
while greed and disaffection are ingrained
like chalk-dust in the ranklings of the mind.

'Rather the Marne than the *Cabiers*'. True enough,
you took yourself off. Dying, your whole life
fell into place. ' 'Sieurs-'dames, this is the wall
where he leaned and rested, this is the well

from which he drank'. Péguy, you mock us now.
History takes the measure of your brow
in blank-eyed bronze, brave mediocre work
of *Niclausse, sculpteur*, cornered in the park

among the stout dogs and lame patriots
and all those ghosts, far-gazing in mid-stride,
rising from where they fell, still on parade,
covered in glory and the blood of beetroots.

3

Vistas of richness and reward. The cedar
uprears its lawns of black cirrus. You have found
hundred-fold return though in the land
of exile. You are Joseph the Provider;

and in the fable this is your proper home;
three sides of a courtyard where the bees thrum
in the crimped hedges and the pigeons flirt
and paddle, and sunlight pierces the heart-

shaped shutter-patterns in the afternoon,
shadows of fleurs-de-lys on the stone floors.
Here life is labour and pastime and orison
like something from a simple book of hours;

and immortality, your measured task,
inscribes its antique scars on the new desk
among your relics, bits of ivory quartz
and dented snuffbox won at Austerlitz.

The proofs pile up; the dead are made alive
to their posthumous fame. Here is the archive
of your stewardship; here is your true domaine,
its fields of discourse ripening to the Marne.

Chateau de Trie is yours, Chartres is yours,
and the carved knight of Gisors with the hound;
Colombey-les-deux-Eglises; St. Cyr's
cadres and echelons are yours to command.

Yours is their dream of France, militant-pastoral:
musky red gillyvors, the wicker bark
of clematis braided across old brick
and the slow chain that cranks into the well

morning and evening. It is Domrémy
restored; the mystic strategy of Foch
and Bergson with its time-scent, dour panache
deserving of martyrdom. It is an army

of poets, converts, vine-dressers, men skilled
in wood or metal, peasants from the Beauce,
terse teachers of Latin and those unschooled
in all but the hard rudiments of grace.

Such dreams portend, the dreamer prophesies,
is this not true? Truly, if you are wise,
deny such wisdom; bid the grim *bonne-femme*
defend your door: 'M'sieur is not at home'.

4

This world is different, belongs to them—
the lords of limit and of contumely.
It matters little whether you go tamely
or with rage and defiance to your doom.

This is your enemies' country which they took
in the small hours an age before you woke,
went to the window, saw the mist-hewn
statues of the lean kine emerge at dawn.

Outflanked again, too bad! You still have pride,
haggard obliquities: those that take remorse
and the contempt of others for a muse,
bound to the alexandrine as to the *Code*

Napoléon. Thus the bereaved soul returns
upon itself, grows resolute at chess,
in war-games hurling dice of immense loss
into the breach; thus punitively mourns.

This is no old Beauce manoir that you keep
but the rue de la Sorbonne, the cramped shop,
its unsold *Cahiers* built like barricades,
its fierce disciples, disciplines and feuds,

the camelot-cry of 'sticks'! As Tharaud says,
'all through your life the sound of broken glass'.
So much for Jaurès murdered in cold pique
by some vexed shadow of the belle époque,

some guignol strutting at the window-frame.
But what of you, Péguy, who came to 'exult',
to be called 'wolfish' by your friends? The guilt
belongs to time; and you must leave on time.

Jaurès was killed blindly, yet with reason:
'let us have drums to beat down his great voice'.
So you spoke to the blood. So, you have risen
above all that and fallen flat on your face

5

among the beetroots, where we are constrained
to leave you sleeping and to step aside
from the fleshed bayonets, the fusillade
of red-rimmed smoke like stubble being burned;

to turn away and contemplate the working
of the radical soul—instinct, intelligence,
memory, call it what you will—waking
into the foreboding of its inheritance,

its landscape and inner domain; images
of earth and grace. Across Artois the rois-mages
march on Bethlehem; sun-showers fall
slantwise over the kalefield, the canal.

Hedgers and ditchers, quarrymen, thick-shod
curés de campagne, each with his load,
shake off those cares and burdens; they become,
in a bleak visionary instant, seraphim

looking towards Chartres, the spired sheaves,
stone-thronged annunciations, winged ogives
uplifted and uplifting from the winter-gleaned
furrows of that criss-cross-trodden ground.

Or say it is Pentecost: the hawthorn-tree,
set with coagulate magnified flowers of may,
blooms in a haze of light; old chalk-pits brim
with seminal verdure from the roots of time.

Landscape is like revelation; it is both
singular crystal and the remotest things.
Cloud-shadows of seasons revisit the earth,
odourless myrrh borne by the wandering kings.

Happy are they who, under the gaze of God,
die for the 'terre charnelle', marry her blood
to theirs, and, in strange Christian hope, go down
into the darkness of resurrection,

into sap, ragwort, melancholy thistle,
almondy meadowsweet, the freshet-brook
rising and running through small wilds of oak,
past the elder-tump that is the child's castle.

Inevitable high summer, richly scarred
with furze and grief; winds drumming the fame
of the tin legions lost in haystack and stream!
Here the lost are blest, the scarred most sacred:

odd village workshops grimed and peppercorned
in a dust of dead spiders, paper-crowned
sunflowers with the bleached heads of rag dolls,
brushes in aspic, clay pots, twisted nails;

the clinking anvil and clear sheepbell-sound,
at noon and evening, of the angelus;
coifed girls like geese, labourers cap in hand,
and walled gardens espaliered with angels;

solitary bookish ecstasies, proud tears,
proud tears, for the forlorn hope, the guerdon
of Sedan, 'oh les braves gens!', English Gordon
stepping down sedately into the spears.

Patience hardens to a pittance, courage
unflinchingly declines into sour rage,
the cobweb-banners, the shrill bugle-bands
and the bronze warriors resting on their wounds.

These fatal decencies, they make us lords
over ourselves: familial debts and dreads,
keepers of old scores, the kindly ones
telling their beady sous, the child-eyed crones

who guard the votive candles and the faint
invalid's night-light of the sacrament,
a host of lilies and the table laid
for early mass from which you stood aside

to find salvation, your novena cleaving
brusquely against the grain of its own myth,
its truth and justice, to a kind of truth,
a justice hard to justify. 'Having

spoken his mind he'd a mind to be silent'.
But who would credit that, that one talent
dug from the claggy Beauce and returned to it
with love, honour, suchlike bitter fruit?

6

To dispense, with justice; or, to dispense
with justice. Thus the catholic god of France,
with honours all even, honours all, even
the damned in the brazen Invalides of Heaven.

Here there should be a section without words
for military band alone: 'Sambre et Meuse',
the 'Sidi Brahim' or 'Le Roi s'Amuse';
white gloves and monocles and polished swords

and Dreyfus with his buttons off, chalk-faced
but standing to attention, the school prig
caught in some act and properly disgraced.
A puffy satrap prances on one leg

to snap the traitor's sword, his ordered rage
bursting with 'cran et gloire' and gout of rouge.
The chargers click and shiver. There is no stir
in the drawn ranks, among the hosts of the air,

all draped and gathered by the weird storm-light
cheap wood-engravings cast on those who fought
at Mars-la-Tour, Sedan; or on the men
in the world-famous stories of Jules Verne

or nailed at Golgotha. Drumrap and fife
hit the right note: 'A mort le Juif! Le Juif
à la lanterne!' Serenely the mob howls,
its silent mouthings hammered into scrolls

torn from *Apocalypse*. No wonder why
we fall to violence out of apathy,
redeemed by falling and restored to grace
beyond the dreams of mystic avarice.

But who are 'we', since history is law,
clad in our skins of silver, steel and hide,
or in our rags, with rotten teeth askew,
heroes or knaves as Clio shall decide?

'We' are crucified Pilate, Caiaphas
in his thin soutane and Judas with the face
of a man who has drunk wormwood. We come
back empty-handed from Jerusalem

counting our blessings, honestly admire
the wrath of the peacemakers, for example
Christ driving the money-changers from the temple,
applaud the Roman steadiness under fire.

We are the occasional just men who sit
in gaunt self-judgment on their self-defeat,
the elite hermits, secret orators
of an old faith devoted to new wars.

We are 'embusqués', having no wounds to show
save from the thorns, ecstatic at such pain.
Once more the truth advances; and again
the metaphors of blood begin to flow.

7

Salute us all, Christus with your iron
garlands of poppies and ripe carrion.
No, sleep where you stand; let some boy-officer
take up your vigil with your dungfork spear.

What vigil is this, then, among the polled
willows, cart-shafts uptilted against skies,
translucent rain at jutting calvaries;
on paths that are rutted and broken-walled?

What is this relic fumbled with such care
by mittened fingers in dugout or bomb-
tattered, jangling estaminet's upper room?
The incense from a treasured tabatière,

you watchmen at the Passion. Péguy said
'why do I write of war? Simply because
I have not been there. In time I shall cease
to invoke it'. We still dutifully read

'heureux ceux qui sont morts'. Drawn on the past
these presences endure; they have not ceased
to act, suffer, crouching into the hail
like labourers of their own memorial

or those who worship at its marble rote,
their many names one name, the common 'dur'
built into duration, the endurance of war;
blind Vigil herself, helpless and obdurate.

And yet what sights: Saul groping in the dust
for his broken glasses, or the men far-gone
on the road to Emmaus who saw the ghost.
Commit all this to memory. The line

falters, reforms, vanishes into the smoke
of its own unknowing; mother, dad,
gone in that shell-burst, with the other dead,
'pour la patrie', according to the book.

8

Dear lords of life, stump-toothed, with ragged breath,
throng after throng cast out upon the earth,
flesh into dust, who slowly come to use
dreams of oblivion in lieu of paradise,

push on, push on! — through struggle, exhaustion,
indignities of all kinds, the impious Christian
oratory, 'vos morituri', through berserk fear,
laughing, howling, 'servitude et grandeur'

in other words, in nameless gobbets thrown
up by the blast, names issuing from mouths
of the dying, with their dying breaths.
But rest assured, bristly-brave gentlemen

of Normandie and Loire. Death does you proud,
every heroic commonplace, 'Amor',
'Fidelitas', polished like old armour,
stamped forever into the featureless mud.

Poilus and sous-officiers who plod
to your lives' end, name your own recompense,
expecting nothing but the grace of France,
drawn to her arms, her august plenitude.

The blaze of death goes out, the mind leaps
for its salvation, is at once extinct;
its last thoughts tetter the furrows, distinct
in dawn twilight, caught on the barbed loops.

Whatever strikes and maims us it is not
fate, to our knowledge. En avant, Péguy!
The irony of advancement. Say 'we
possess nothing; try to hold on to that'.

9

There is an ancient landscape of green branches—
true tempérament de droite, you have your wish—
crosshatching twigs and light, goldfinches
among the peppery lilac, the small fish

pencilled into the stream. Ah, such a land
the Ile de France once was. Virelai and horn
wind through the meadows, the dawn-masses sound
fresh triumphs for our Saviour crowned with scorn.

Good governors and captains, by your leave,
you also were sore-wounded but those wars
are ended. Iron men who bell the hours,
marshals of porte-cochère and carriage-drive,

this is indeed perfection, this is the heart
of the mystère. Yet one would not suppose
Péguy's 'defeat', 'affliction', your lost cause.
Old Bourbons view-hallooing for regret

among the cobwebs and the ghostly wine,
you dream of warrior-poets and the Meuse
flowing so sweetly; the androgynous Muse
your priest-confessor, sister-châtelaine.

How the mood swells to greet the gathering storm!
The chestnut trees begin to thresh and cast
huge canisters of blossom at each gust.
Coup de tonnerre! Bismarck is in the room!

Bad memories, seigneurs? Such wraiths appear
on summer evenings when the gnat-swarm spins
a dying moment on the tremulous air.
The curtains billow and the rain begins

its night-long vigil. Sombre heartwoods gleam,
the clocks replenish the small hours' advance
and not a soul has faltered from its trance.
'Je est un autre', that fatal telegram,

floats past you in the darkness, unreceived.
Connoisseurs of obligation, history
stands, a blank instant, awaiting your reply:
'If we but move a finger France is saved'!

Down in the river-garden a grey-gold
dawnlight begins to silhouette the ash.
A rooster wails remotely over the marsh
like Mr. Punch mimicking a lost child.

At Villeroy the copybook lines of men
rise up and are erased. Péguy's cropped skull
dribbles its ichor, its poor thimbleful,
a simple lesion of the complex brain.

Woefully battered but not too bloody,
smeared by fraternal root-crops and at one
with the fritillary and the veined stone,
having composed his great work, his small body,

for the last rites of truth, whatever they are,
or the Last Judgment which is much the same,
or Mercy, even, with her tears and fire,
he commends us to nothing, leaves a name

for the burial-detail to gather up
with rank and number, personal effects,
the next-of-kin and a few other facts,
his arm over his face as though in sleep

or to ward off the sun: the body's prayer,
the tribute of his true passion, for Chartres
steadfastly cleaving to the Beauce, for her,
the Virgin of innumerable charities.

'Encore plus douloureux et doux'. Note how
sweetness devours sorrow, renders it again,
turns to affliction each more carnal pain.
Whatever is fulfilled is now the law

where law is grace, that grace won by inches,
inched years. The men of sorrows do their stint,
whose golgothas are the moon's trenches,
the sun's blear flare over the salient.

J'accuse! j'accuse! — making the silver prance
and curvet, and the dust-motes jig to war
across the shaky vistas of old France,
the gilt-edged maps of Strasbourg and the Saar.

Low tragedy, high farce, fight for command,
march, counter-march, and come to the salute
at every hole-and-corner burial-rite
bellowed with hoarse dignity into the wind.

Take that for your example! But still mourn,
being so moved: éloge and elegy
so moving on the scene as if to cry
'in memory of those things these words were born'.



(1873–1914)

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Notes

- 2.1. poet with the head of a bull./*Poetry*, a tapestry by Jean Lurçat, depicts the twelve signs of the zodiac and a poet with the head of a bull.
- 2.7. Rather the Marne than the *Cahiers*./adapts a phrase from a review-article by P. McCarthy, *TLS*, 16th June, 1978, p. 675.
- 4.1. the lords of limit/ The phrase is Auden's, from an early poem 'Now from my window-sill I watch the night'. See *The English Auden*, edited by Edward Mendelson (London, 1977), pp. 115–6.
- 4.6. the camelot-cry of 'sticks'!/ *Les camelots du roi* was a right-wing, anti-Dreyfusard organization, prominent in the street-battles of the period.
- 4.6. As Tharaud says, /Daniel Halévy, *Péguy and 'Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine'*, translated from the French by Ruth Bethell (London, 1946), p. 171: 'Always, all through his life, this sound of broken glass, to use Tharaud's expression'.
- 5.8. die for the 'terre charnelle', /Charles Péguy, *Eve* (1913): 'Heureux ceux qui sont morts pour la terre charnelle, /Mais pourvu que ce fût dans une juste guerre.'
- 9.1. true tempérament de droite, you have your wish -/see Robert Speaight, *Georges Bernanos* (London, 1973), p. 36, for 'what Jacques Maritain has called a *tempérament de droite*'. See also pp. 17–18 for Speaight's view of the great similarities, as well as the great differences, between Bernanos and Péguy.
- 9.8. 'je est un autre', that fatal telegram, /Arthur Rimbaud, *Lettre à Georges Izambard*, May 1871: 'vous ne comprendrez pas du tout, et je ne saurais presque vous expliquer . . . Je est un autre . . .'
- 10.7. Encore plus douloureux et doux./from a quatrain by Charles Péguy.
- 10.11. in memory of those things these words were born. /adapts a sentence from Marcel Raymond, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism* (London, 1961), p. 190 : referring to Péguy's 'Présentation de la Beauce à Notre-Dame de Chartres'.

Sappho: Prayer to Aphrodite

translated by Alfred Corn

Eternal Aphrodite, Zeus's daughter, throne
Of inlay, deviser of nets, I entreat you:
Do not let a yoke of grief and anguish weigh
Down my soul, Lady,

But come to me now, as you did before
When, hearing my cries even at that distance
You slammed the door of your father's house—
Golden! and hastened

To harness your chariot. Then pretty sparrows
Drew you forthwith over the dark lands,
Beating their crisp wings. From the outer spheres,
Down through the inner,

Steeplly they descended. At last you, Divine Lady,
Beaming your unearthly smile at me,
Asked was I in distress once again—for,
Why had I called you?

And what did my unruly heart demand
Of you now? "And whom do I urge this time
To return your generous friendship? Who,
Sappho, has been stubborn?"

For if she avoids you, soon she will come
Knocking; if refuses presents, will shower them
On you; if she loves not, she shall love, and
Learn to be kinder."

I beg you, come. Free me from this oppression.
All that my heart longs to see accomplished,
Goddess, do it. No one could resist if you were
Fighting beside me.

Montale: Dora Markus

translated by Alfred Corn

1.

It was where the wooden bridge
crosses to Porto Corsini on the open sea
and a few men, in slow motion, lower
or haul in their nets. With a wave
of your hand you gestured toward the other
invisible shore, your true homeland.
Then we followed the canal as far as the wharves
of the town, glistening with soot,
in that lowland where a cold spring
slowly settled down, outside memory.

And here, where a classical age
begins to break up under delicate
Asiatic tensions,
your words shimmered like rainbows on the scales
of a trout drowning in air.

Your restlessness calls to mind
birds of passage that crash against lighthouses
on stormy nights—
but your tenderness, too, is a storm,
always lowering, never breaking;
and its lulls are rarer still.
Pushed so far, how do you stay
afloat in that lake
of indifference, your heart? Perhaps
an amulet protects you, one you keep
next to your lipstick, your nail-file,
your compact: a white mouse,
in ivory. *Somehow you survive!*

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2.

Now, in your Carinthia,
with its flowering myrtles and little ponds,
leaning over the edge you look down
at the timid carp that gapes and swallows;
or stroll under the lindens, their crowns
thrusting up into sunset
bonfires, the waters ablaze
with awnings of landings and hotels.

The evening that stretches out
over a misty inlet brings,
above the stutter of motors,
only the cries of geese; and an interior
of snowy tiles tells
the blackened mirror that hardly
recognized you a story of errors
calmly acknowledged, engraving it within
where the dustcloth doesn't reach.

Your golden legend, Dora—
but it is already written in the fixed stares
of those men with fluffy sidewhiskers,
dignified and weak, portraits
in big, gilt frames; a refrain
that comes back with every chord wrung
from the cracked barrel-organ at the hour
when dusk falls, always later and later.

It is written there. The evergreen
bayleaf all through the kitchen
survives, the voice does not fail,
Ravenna is far away; and a barbarous
creed keeps secreting its poison.
What can it want from you? None surrenders,
voice, legend, nor destiny. . . .
But it is late, always later and later.

Virgil: The Pyres

translated by Robert Fitzgerald

(Aeneid Book XI, 182–209)

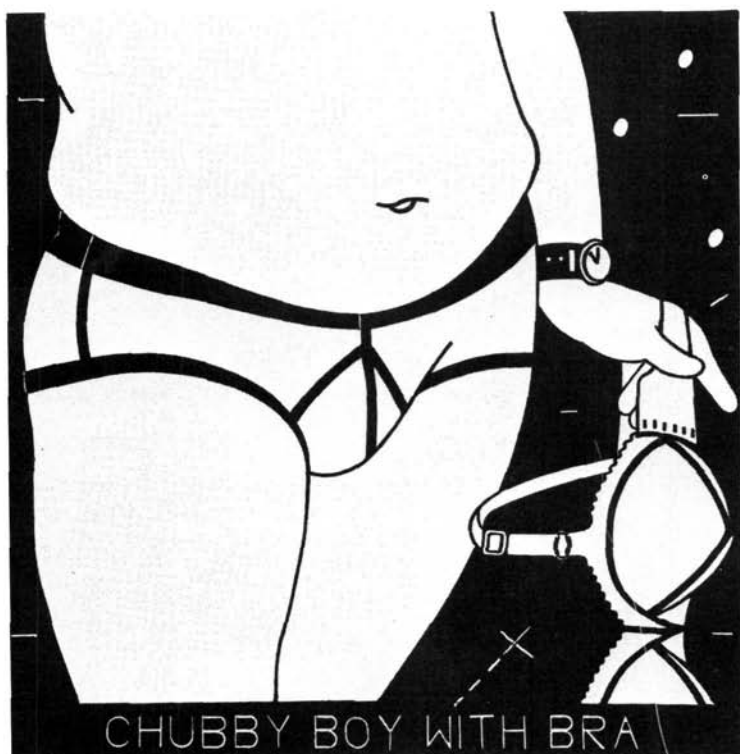
Dawn at that hour
Brought on her kindly light for ill mankind,
Arousing men to labor and distress.
By now Aeneas and Tarchon had built up
Their pyres along the curving shore. On them
In the old-time ritual each bore and placed
The bodies of his men. The smoky fires
Caught underneath and hid the face of heaven
In a tall gloom. Round pyres as they blazed
Troops harnessed in bright armor marched three times
In parade formation, and the cavalry
Swept about the sad cremation flame
Three times, while calling out their desolate cries.
Tears fell upon the ground, fell upon armor.
High in air rose the wild yells of men,

The somber song of trumpets. There were some
Who hurled gear taken from the Latin slain
Into the fire, helmets and ornate swords,
And reins and chariot wheels. Others tossed in
Gifts better known—the dead men's shields and weapons
Luck had not attended. On all sides
Death received burnt offerings of oxen,
Throats of swine were bled into the flames
With cattle commandeered from all the fields.
Then over the whole shore they stood to see
Their fellow-soldiers burning, and kept watch
On pyres as they flared: men could not be
Torn from the scene till dew-drenched night came on
And a night sky studded with fiery stars.
The wretched Latins, also, in their quarter,
Built countless pyres, and of their many dead
They buried some, took some inland, or home
Into the city. All the rest they burned,
Heaped up in mammoth carnage, bodies jumbled,
Numberless and nameless. Everywhere
Field strove with field in brightness of thick fires.

Portfolio

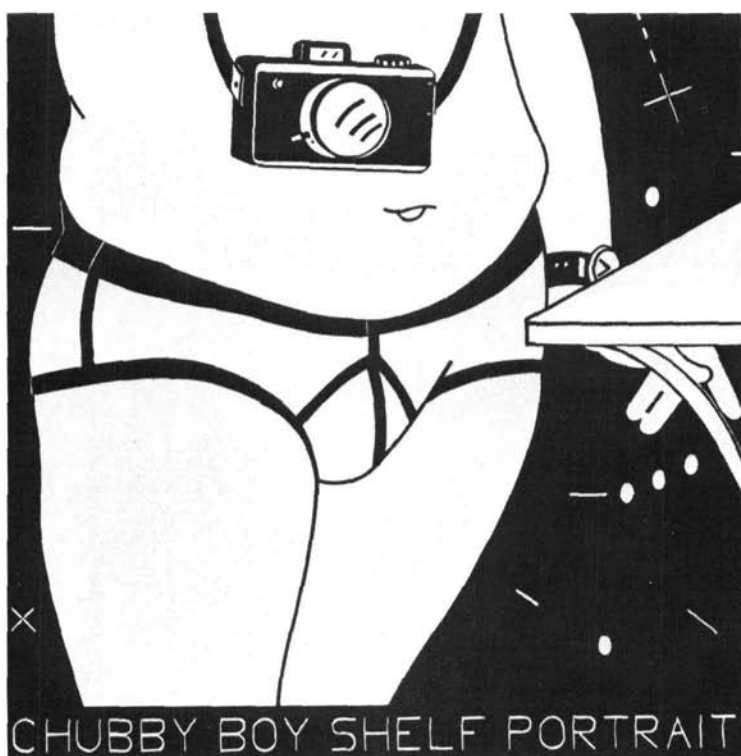
Chubby Boys
and
Chubby Girls

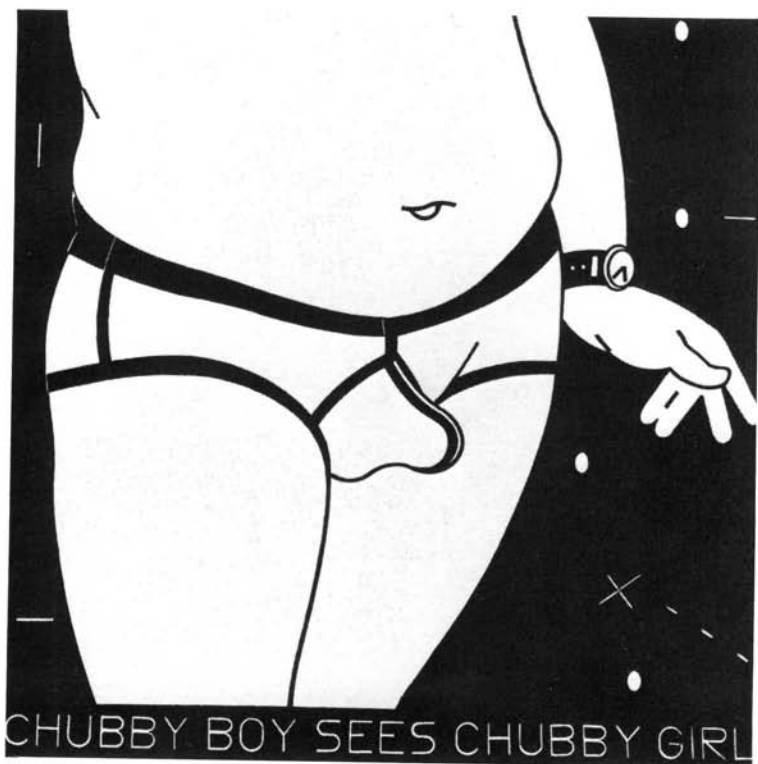
Steve Gianakos



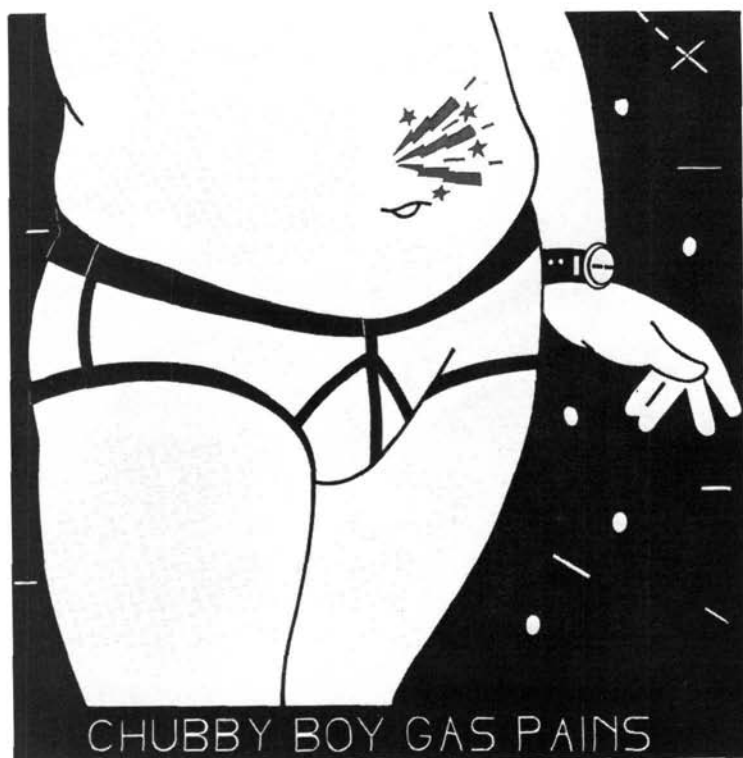


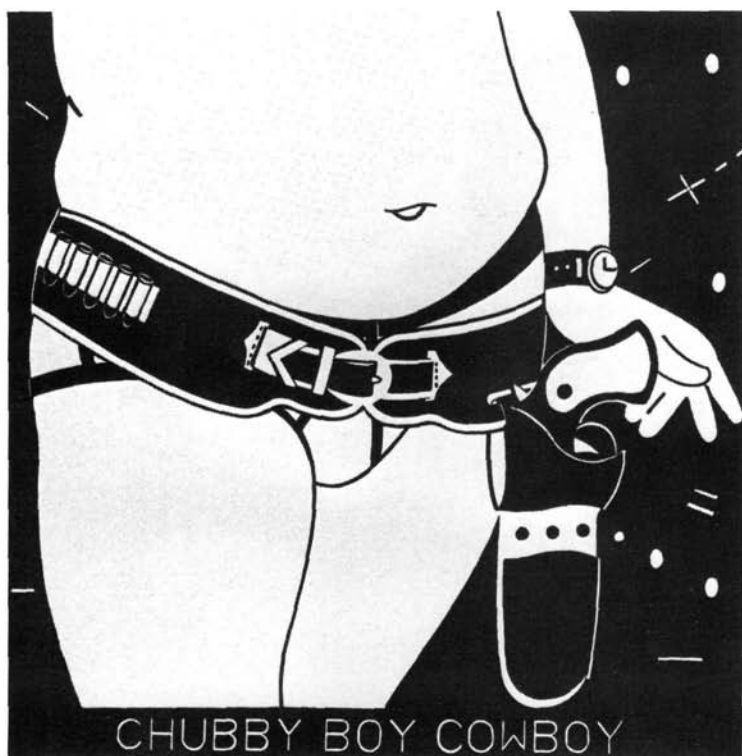
CHUBBY BOY WITH SPARE TIRE



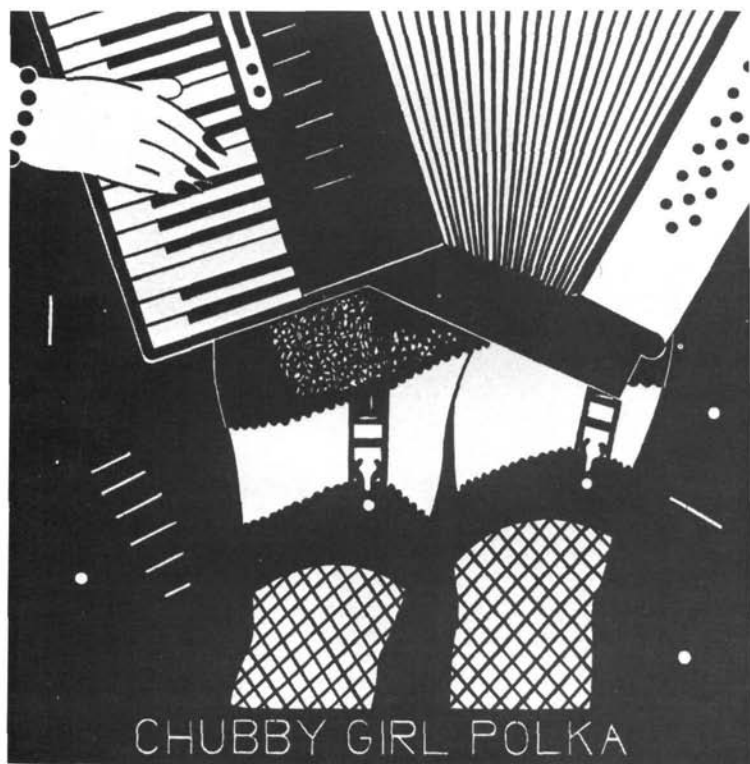


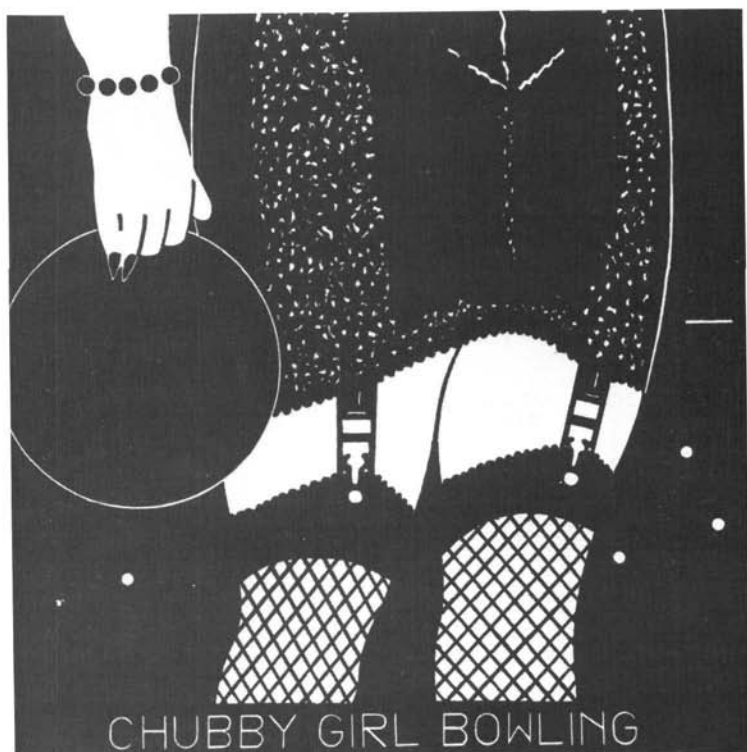
CHUBBY BOY SEES CHUBBY GIRL

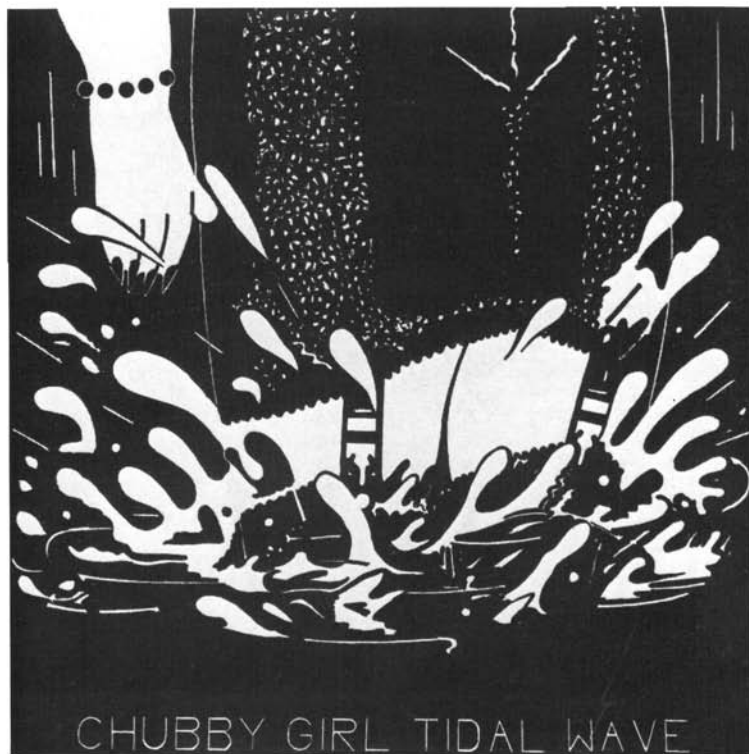




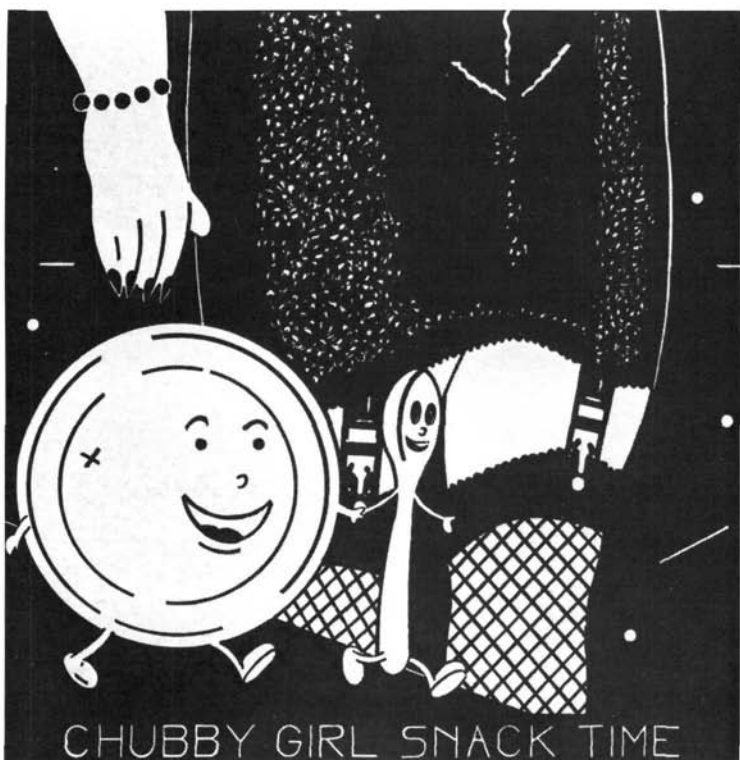








CHUBBY GIRL TIDAL WAVE



Two Poems by Howard Nemerov

Acts of God

Are exhibitions of bad taste on a scale
Beyond belief, filling your living room
With mud or lava, blowing the schoolhouse roof
Down on the parking lot, tossing the boats
Out of the marina and smashing them across
The highway's back, piquantly fixing for
The earthquake to catch his people on their knees
Good Friday morning; if Attila the Hun
Had done the hundredth part of what God does
You wouldn't ask him to dinner at your house
But God gets away with it time and time again
And gets adored for doing it as well
As lest He do it to us another time.
The hope is our prayers will make Him nicer, but
It don't look likely, and to make it worse
An Act of God is anything at all
That lets the insurance people off the hook.

Inside the Onion

Slicing the sphere in planes you map inside
The secret sections filled up with the forms
That gave us mind, free-hand asymmetries
Perfecting for us the beautiful inexact

That mathematic may approximate
And clue us into but may never mate
Exactly: bulb, root, fruit of the fortunate fall
That feeds us with the weeps and utter tang

Of the ovoid circles and the slipshod squares,
Triangles rounded at their corners, space
Geometrized resisting its geometry
Imperfectly, as it was meant to do—

Like stepping on a raft and rocking it
So that its ripples square the corners off
For just a second before the Mad Housewife
Soothes down the angles and bends them into curves

As worrying her secret might be known
And ours, empiric and its theory
Be one again, her crispen crystalline
Arithmetic raveled and riddled in Time,

Her rounding off and averaging out
That favors the evenses against the odds
And makes the onion, holding in our tears,
One and the same throughout the in and out.

Five Poems by Killarney Clary

There are more of us. We came out of a time when birth was happy.

We are prizes. Perhaps we shouldn't have been so important, so healthy. If any of us suffered war, we were pained less by the enemy than our ability to kill him.

Our number seems a useless power. We were sold on dissatisfaction—now we're sold families but they're no sign of survival this time.

I am very lucky but that's not life. And maybe no more than any person born in any year, I want but don't know what, feel unsettled in a sea of similarly restless faces. The breadth of possibility makes choosing seem evasive. We decide but we are slow and small with doubts.

It was 1954 when my parents moved to have room for me. I remember a box my mother packed for me to store at school, filled with canned milk and soup and Hershey bars.

Two thousand good nights. My checked uniform on a hook. My face to the hall light because that felt like a day in the sun. Not fear, not loneliness, but my preference for sleeping near the window and near the floor, humming.

* * *

Larger than hand-passed dangers await us. Clouds and cancers. We don't work them through to Science or God and reconcile ourselves to them. We are angry at death, cheated.

Raised to a New World View—that all things wear down to one and the same—we heard the aberrations were most extreme. The neighbor boy was “not at all well.” Then, as we recognized intolerance, we thought carefully about murder and considered the poor man who lived on. Our reactions slowed. We feel guilty.

Accidents. Connections. Not fate nor justice but chance. So we don't pray, or hope, or work methodically toward an end. We live proudly, busily—coping always with how to free-up time. We are sincere and self-conscious, like nervous laughter.

But it was lovely in the dark hall as we shuffled and settled, close and murmuring as the sky supposedly fell in. My elbows to the wall, my hands at the back of my neck, I wondered who whispered near me, who because of circumstance might have touched me that day—Mary Ellen or Philip. It was the last Friday of the month as the siren held its note and across the city people checked their watches. Yes, I would eat my cheese sandwich later and would even find my sweater.

Now we are confused, send condolences to TV characters who have been sickened for the sake of our need to spend time. Gather and spill. We are afraid we will know too soon the year, perhaps the month when we will leave. We want the world to last and each of us to die separately. But then, in a way, we were all born together.

* * *

Breathless. White lights in the trees. They call the color Dusty Rose—of napkins folded to be birds, of tablecloths, tables padded so the china presses. Pitasporum. Pale, they say. I'll be alright. I put my foot against the chair leg.

Down. Like its own place. Warm water and repetition. But there's a nearly empty plate. I can't hear because I'm thinking of what I hear. And though the evening's balmy still, the leaves are all moving. The sky gives and I'm rising as I fall into a calm like tears with my chilled body and the little flame.

* * *

Sleep was streams of red and white lights curving through the passes. I saw them from a melancholy, silent and weary. I want to fall in love every moment. The ache is fine and selfish, so huge and sad. If someone were here tonight, they would know what I should do with my arms which are so heavy and the numbness spreading from my spine. I might talk with them and learn how to find places for the gifts. If there were skin other than my own or a certain need. Time wears the dazzle of the small lights. I am chilled. I begin to smell the trees. Sleep was all that was left. A small and comfortable boat on the whole ocean.

* * *

I am used to working now. And quitting, leaving offices and elevators carrying people who would be together for no other reason.

It's harder to be happy. I am not using my full self—we each complain. I am better than this day-to-day. Special. I've never considered life a challenge but the worst parts can be funny. I don't want to be remembered; I want to feel, do good where I am because I am not a hero or a joker. I am tired and busy. The room is a mess and the noise. Call me. Kiss me. Tell me the best place to eat lunch.

you've escaped altogether. Because without the Kafka will-
power you can't reach out or be caught ~~(the same thing, here)~~
in nothing and nowhere. I was going to call it a desert,
^{from} ~~from old habit~~, but where's the sand, where's the camels,
where's the air?— I'm still mensch enough to crack a joke—
you see? Oh ~~but~~ I forgot—you didn't like my jokes, my
unfortunately you had no life in you,
fooling around with kids. My poor boy, in all those books
and diaries and letters (the ones you posted, to strangers,
it before you put the words
to women) you said a hundred times ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ in my mouth, in your literary way,
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ ^{How} ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ ^{imaginary} letter: you were 'unfit for life',
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ and so death was ^{given} ~~given~~ how would you say, naturally to you.
It doesn't come ~~so easily~~ ^{naturally} to a man like ^{of vigour} me I was, I can tell
you, and so here I am writing, talking— I don't know if there
is a word for ^{what} this is anyway, it's Hermann Kafka; ^{I've} ~~I~~ ^{outlived}
you, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ ^{here} ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ you, there, the same as
~~here~~.

That is what you really accuse me of, you know, in ^{sixty} ~~sixty~~ or so pages ^{the} ~~the~~ length of that letter varies a ~~bit~~ ^{little}
~~xxxxxx~~ from language to language, of course it's been translated
into everything ~~xxxxxx~~ I don't know what, ~~Hottentot~~ and Iceland-
ic ~~xxxxxx~~ Chinese, though you wrote it 'for me' in German.)
I outlived you, not for seven years, as an old sick man, after
you died, but while you were young and alive. ~~It's~~ ^{clear} ~~clear~~
as daylight, from the examples you give of being afraid of
me, from the time you were a little boy. You were not
afraid, you were envious. At first, when I took you swimming
and you say you felt yourself a ~~nothing~~, puny and weak,
beside my big, strong naked body in the change-house, all
right, you ^{old} ~~say~~ you were proud of such a father, a father
with a fine physique... and may I remind you that father

A page from Nadine Gordimer's latest short story.



Hugo Cassirer

The Art of Fiction LXXVII

Nadine Gordimer

*This interview with South African writer, Nadine Gordimer, took place in two parts—in the fall of 1979, when she was in America on a publicity tour for her most recent novel, *Burger's Daughter*, and in the spring of 1980, when she was here to see her son graduate from college.*

Our first meeting was in a room set aside for us by her publisher, Viking Press—one of those conference rooms made cozy by lots of books and claustrophobic by its lack of windows. The hotel room where our second meeting took place was slightly more conducive to amiable conversation. But Gordimer does not waste words in conversation any more

than she does in her prose. On both occasions she was ready to begin our interview the moment I walked in the door and ready to end it the moment the hour she had suggested for our meeting was up. Her clarity and mental focus allow her to express a great deal in a short amount of time.

A petite, bird-like, soft-spoken woman, Gordimer manages to combine a fluidity and gentleness with the seemingly restrained and highly structured workings of her mind. It was as if the thirty-five odd years that she had devoted to writing at the time we met had trained her to distill passion—and as a South African writer she is necessarily aware of being surrounded by passion on all sides—into form, whether of the written or spoken word. At the same time, she conveyed a sense of profound caring about the subject matter of her writing; those subjects natural to any writer concerned with the human condition, but set, in her case, in the heightened context of South African life. Her manner seemed to say, "Yes, these are important subjects we're discussing. Now let's get through talking about them so I can get back to the business of writing about them."

Nadine Gordimer was born nearly sixty years ago in a small gold-mining town near Johannesburg. Her first short stories were published in 1939, when she was fifteen. In the United States, during the '50s, her fiction appeared in the New Yorker, among other magazines. Her first novel, The Lying Days, was published in 1953, after which she produced seven novels, including Burger's Daughter which was published to world-wide acclaim. Since then Gordimer has published her eighth novel, July's People, and her seventh collection of short stories, A Soldier's Embrace. Among the awards she has received for her work are the Booker Prize for Fiction, the James Tait Black Prize, the W.H. Smith Award and the international Grand Aigle d'Or in France.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have seasons in South Africa, or is it hot all year round?

GORDIMER

Oh no, we have seasons. Near the equator, there's very little difference in the seasons. But right down where we are, at the end of the continent, and also high up where I live in Johannesburg—6000 feet up—you have very different seasons. We have a sharp cold winter. No snow—it's rather like your late fall or early spring—sunny, fresh, cold at night. We have a very definite rainy season. But you don't see rain for about half the year. You forget that rain exists. So it's a wonderful feeling when you wake up one day, and you smell the rain in the air. Many of the old houses, like ours, have galvanized iron or tin roofs. It's very noisy when there's a heavy rain—it just gallops down on the roof. The house that I was brought up in had a tin roof, so it's one of my earliest memories, lying in bed and listening to the rain . . . and hail, which, of course, on a tin roof is deafening.

INTERVIEWER

When was your first trip out of South Africa?

GORDIMER

My first trip out was to what was then called Rhodesia—Zimbabwe. That might seem very much the same thing as South Africa to you, but it isn't. Zimbabwe is Central Africa, sub-tropical, shading into tropical. But my first real trip out was much later. I had already published two books—I was thirty years old. I went to Egypt, on my way to England, and America. Perhaps it was a good transition. In London, I felt at home, but in an unreal way—I realized when I got there that my picture of London came entirely from books. Particularly Dickens and Virginia Woolf. The writers who, I'd thought, had impressed me with the features of English life, like Orwell, did not have this evocation when I was actually in the place; they were not writers with a strong sense of place. Woolf and Dickens obviously were. So that when I walked around in Chelsea I felt that this was definitively Mrs. Dalloway's country. I remember I stayed in a hotel near Victoria Station. And at night, these dark, sooty buildings,

the dampness when one leant against a wall—absolutely decayed buildings. . .

INTERVIEWER

Were you as unprepared for this first trip off the African Continent, and as awed by it as Rebecca in your novel, *Guest of Honour*?

GORDIMER

No, my mother, who hadn't been back to England for about twenty years, prepared me. She provided me with woolly underwear and whatnot, which I threw away after I arrived. But Rebecca's trip to Switzerland . . . I think descriptions of impressions from the air are something that writers nowadays have to be careful of. Like train journeys in mid-nineteenth century literature . . . they made such a change in people's lives. They produced a . . . leap in consciousness, especially so far as time was concerned. I can imagine what it must have been, the thought of taking a train that was to go rushing through the countryside. There were so many descriptions of trains in the literature of the day. But I think writers must be careful now not to overdo the use of travel as a metaphor for tremendous internal changes. "The journey" now is by air, and think of how many writers use this—in my own books it appears in *The Conservationist* and in *Guest of Honour*. And indeed, in *Burger's Daughter*, Rosa Burger takes her first trip out of South Africa; I had to resist the temptation to talk about the journey—I describe only the landing, because that particular piece of the landscape could be useful later on.

INTERVIEWER

Was this trip to England a sort of "back to the roots" expedition?

GORDIMER

No. But it brought an understanding of what I was, and helped me to shed the last vestiges of colonialism. I didn't know I was a colonial, but then I had to realize that I was.

Even though my mother was only six when she came to South Africa from England, she still would talk about people “going home.” But after my first trip out, I realized that “home” was certainly and exclusively—Africa. It could never be anywhere else.

INTERVIEWER

What brought your parents to South Africa?

GORDIMER

The same thing brought them both. They were part of the whole colonial expansion. My maternal grandfather came out in the 1890s with a couple of brothers. South Africa was regarded as a land of opportunity for Europeans. And indeed, he went prospecting for diamonds in Kimberley. I don't think he found very much—maybe some small stones. After that, his entire life was the stock exchange. He was what we call a “tickey-snatcher.” A tickey was a tiny coin like a dime—alas, we don't have it anymore. It was equal to three English pence. “Tickey” is a lovely word, don't you think? Well, my grandfather was a tickey-snatcher on the stock exchange, which meant that he sat there all day, and that he bought and sold stocks—making a quick buck.

My father's story is really not such a happy one. He was born in Lithuania, and he went through the whole Jewish pogrom syndrome, you know. He had hardly any schooling. There wasn't any high school for Jewish kids in his village. His father was a shipping clerk and there were twelve children. I'm sure they must have been very poor. Their mother was a seamstress. As soon as my father was twelve or thirteen the idea was that he would just go—*somewhere*, either to America or wherever—it was the time of the great expansion, you know, the early 1900s. So his was the classic Ellis Island story—thirteen years old, not speaking a word of English, traveling in the hold of a ship, but all the way to Africa instead of America—it must have been extraordinary. He was a very unadventurous man; he didn't have a strong personality—he was timid. He still is a mystery to me. I wonder if he didn't burn himself out in this tremendous initial adventure,

whether it wasn't really too much for him, and once having found a niche for himself somewhere, he just didn't have the guts to become much of a personality. There was something *arrested* about my father.

INTERVIEWER

What did he do once he got to Africa?

GORDIMER

Like many poor Jews—one either became a shoemaker, a tailor or a watchmaker. He had learned watchmaking. All he had was a little bag with his watchmaking tools. He went to the Transvaal, to the goldfields. He took his little suitcase and went around the mines and asked the miners if anybody wanted a watch fixed. And he would take the watches away to a little room he had somewhere: he would just sit there and mend watches. Then he bought a bicycle and he'd go back 'round the mines. But by the time I came on the scene he had a little jeweller's shop and he was no longer a watchmaker—he employed one. Indeed, he imported his brother-in-law from Russia to do it. By now my father was the tycoon of the family. He brought *nine* sisters out of Lithuania—the poor man—saving up to bring one after the other. I found out later that he hated them all—we didn't ever have family gatherings. I don't know why he hated them so much.

INTERVIEWER

Where exactly was this jeweller's shop?

GORDIMER

In a little town called Springs, which was thirty miles from Johannesburg. I grew up in a small, gold-mining town of about 20,000 people.

INTERVIEWER

What were the schools like there?

GORDIMER

Well, I've had little formal education, really. I had a very

curious childhood. There were two of us—I have an elder sister—and I was the baby, the spoiled one, the darling. I was awful—brash, a show-off, a dreadful child. But maybe that had something to do with having a lot of energy that didn't find any outlet. I wanted to be a dancer—this was my passion, from the age of about four to ten. I absolutely adored dancing. And I can still remember the pleasure, the release, of using the body in this way. There was no question but that I was to be a dancer, and I suppose maybe I would have been. But at the age of ten, I suddenly went into a dead faint one day, having been a very skinny but very healthy child. Nobody took much notice. But then it happened again. So I was taken to the family doctor, and it was discovered that I had an incredibly rapid heartbeat. Nobody had noticed this; it was, I suppose, part of my excitability and liveliness. It was discovered that I had an enlarged thyroid gland, which causes a fast heartbeat and makes one hyperactive. Well, I've since discovered that this isn't a serious malady at all. It happens to hundreds of people—usually at puberty. But my mother got very alarmed. This rapid pulse should have been ignored. But my mother was quite sure that it meant that I had a “bad heart.” So she went immediately to the convent where I attended school and told the nuns, “This child mustn't have any physical training, she mustn't play tennis, she mustn't even swim.” At ten, you know, you don't argue with your mother—she tells you you're sick, you believe her. When I would be about to climb stairs, she would say, “Now, take it slowly, *remember your heart.*” And then of course the tragedy was that I was told I mustn't dance anymore. So the dancing stopped like that, which was a terrible deprivation for me.

It's really only in the last decade of my life that I've been able to face all this. When I realized what my mother had done to me, I went through, at the age of twenty, such resentment—this happens to many of us, but I *really* had reason. When I was thirty, I began to understand why she did it, and thus to pity her. By the time she died in '76 we were reconciled. But it was an extraordinary story.

In brief, my mother was unhappily married. It was a dreadful marriage. I suspect she was sometimes in love with other men; but my mother would never have dreamt of having an affair. Because her marriage was unhappy, she concentrated on her children. The chief person she was attracted to was our family doctor. There's no question. I'm sure it was *quite* unconscious, but the fact that she had this "delicate" daughter, about whom she could be constantly calling the doctor—in those days doctors made house calls, and there would be tea and cookies and long chats—made her keep my "illness" going in this way. Probably I was being wrongly treated anyway, so that what medication should have cleared up, it didn't, and symptoms persisted. Of course, I began to feel terribly important. By that time I was reading all sorts of books that led me to believe my affliction made me very interesting. I was growing up with this legend that I was very delicate, that I had something wrong with my heart.

When I was eleven—I don't know how my mother did this—she took me out of school completely. For a year I had no education at all. But I read tremendously. And I retreated into myself, I became very introspective. She changed my whole character. Then she arranged for me to go to a tutor for three hours a day. She took me there at ten in the morning and picked me up at one. It was such incredible loneliness—it's a terrible thing to do to a child. There I was, all on my own, doing my work; a glass of milk was brought to me by this woman—she was very nice but I had no contact with other children. I spent my whole life, from eleven to sixteen, with older people, with people of my mother's generation. She carted me around to tea parties—I simply lived her life. When she and my father went out at night to dinner she took me along . . . I got to the stage where I could really hardly talk to other children. I was a little old woman.

INTERVIEWER

What about your sister's relationship to you during this time?

GORDIMER

My sister is four years older than I am. She went away to university; she wasn't really a companion to me. I stopped going to the tutor when I was fifteen or sixteen. So that was the extent of my formal education.

When I was twenty-one, or twenty-two, already a published writer, I wanted to go to university to get a little more formal education. But since I hadn't matriculated, I could only do occasional courses at the University of the Witwatersrand—that's Afrikaans for "ridge of white waters." There was something called "general studies"—this was just after the war, and there were lots of veterans who had interrupted their education, and so it was very nice for me—there were people my own age mixed up with the others. A few years ago I gave a graduation address at that same university.

INTERVIEWER

Are you one of these writers to whom they're always trying to give honorary degrees?

GORDIMER

I don't accept them in South Africa. I've taken one—in Belgium in 1981, from the University of Leuven. It turned out to be quite extraordinary, because the man who got an honorary degree with me, Monsignor Oscar Romero, was assassinated two weeks later in El Salvador. In Belgium he had given the most marvelous address. He was such a striking man. He received a standing ovation for about eight minutes from the students. And two weeks later he was lying on the floor of a church, dead.

INTERVIEWER

How long did you go to university?

GORDIMER

One year. This was the first time in my life I'd mixed with blacks, and was more or less the beginning of my political

consciousness. Perhaps the good thing about being carted around with my parents was that they would sit playing gin rummy or something while I wandered around the host's house seeing what I could find to read. I discovered everybody from Henry Miller to Upton Sinclair. It was Sinclair's *The Jungle* that really started me thinking about politics: I thought, good God, these people who are exploited in a meat-packing factory—they're just like blacks here. And the whole idea that people came to America, not knowing the language, having to struggle in sweat shops . . . I didn't relate this to my own father, because my father was bourgeois by then . . . but I related it to the blacks. Again, what a paradox that South Africa was the blacks' *own country*, but they were recruited just as if they had been migrant workers for the mines. So I saw the analogy. And that was the beginning of my thinking about my position vis-à-vis blacks. But though I didn't know anything—I was twelve or thirteen, and leading the odd kind of life I did, living in books—I began to think about these things before, perhaps, I was ready for them. When I got to university, it was through mixing with other people who were writing or painting that I got to know black people as equals. In a general and inclusive, non-racial way, I met people who lived in the world of ideas, in the world that interested me passionately.

In the town where I lived, there was no mental food of this kind at all. I'm often amazed to think how they live, those people, and what an oppressed life it must be, because human beings *must* live in the world of ideas. This dimension in the human psyche is very important. It was there, but they didn't know how to express it. Conversation consisted of trivialities. For women, household matters, problems with children. The men would talk about golf or business or horseracing or whatever their practical interests were. Nobody ever talked about, or even around, the big things—life and death. The whole existential aspect of life was never discussed. I, of course, approached it through books. Thought about it on my own. It was as secret as it would have been to discuss my parents' sex life. It was something so private,

because I felt that there was nobody with whom I could talk about these things, just *nobody*. But then, of course, when I was moving around at university, my life changed. From Europe—it was just after the war—came Existentialism, and at home in South Africa there was great interest in movements of the Left, and black national movements. At that time, the Communist party, and various other leftist movements were not banned. So there were all sorts of Marxist discussion groups. This was an area of thought and conviction I simply never had heard mentioned before. I'd only read about it. And there, of course, were people who were mixing with blacks. So it was through people who were writing, painting, or acting that I started mixing with blacks.

INTERVIEWER

What did you do after that year at university? Did you begin any political activity?

GORDIMER

No, you see I was writing then—a lot. I was concentrating tremendously on writing. I wasn't really interested in politics. My approach to living as a white supremacist, perforce, among blacks, was, I see now, the humanist approach, the individualistic approach. I felt that all I needed, in my own behavior, was to ignore and defy the color bar. In other words my own attitude toward blacks seemed to be sufficient action. I didn't see that it was pretty meaningless until much later.

INTERVIEWER

Were you living on your own then?

GORDIMER

No, I wasn't. In that way I was extremely backward. But you have to look at the kind of dependency that had been induced in me at the crucial age of ten. When other kids were going off to the equivalent of what's known as "summer camp"—"Nadine can't go camping, she's got a *bad heart*! If people go on a hike, she can't go. She's got to stay with

mama." A child like that becomes very corrupt, a kind of jester, an entertainer for grown-ups. Especially at the age of fifteen and sixteen. Adults find you charming. You flirt with other people's husbands instead of with boys your own age. It's a very corrupting thing. I was rather a good mimic. Perhaps it was the beginning of having an ear for dialogue? So I would take off people. Grown-ups would sit around at drink parties, getting a little tight, and there was Nadine prancing around, rather cruelly imitating people whom they knew. It didn't occur to them that the moment their backs were turned I was doing it to them as well.

At any rate, I was still living at home when I went to university, and I used to commute by train into Johannesburg. Then my sister got married and lived in Johannesburg, so that when I didn't want to go home I would go to her, which was very nice for me, to have a base there. But I still didn't have the guts, I don't know why, to move out of home, the mining town of Springs. And you see I wasn't earning enough by my writing, heaven knows, to live on. I was doing something that no kid does nowadays—I was living off my father. On the other hand, my needs were so modest. It never occurred to me that one would want a car—now every kid has a jalopy—this was just not the kind of thing that I would have dreamt of. All I wanted was to buy books. I earned enough with my writing here and there to do this, and of course I also used the library tremendously, which, again, people don't seem to do so much anymore. When I talk to young writers, and I say, "Have you read this or that?"—"Well no, but books are so expensive . . ."—I say, "Well for God's sake! The central library is a wonderful library. For heaven's sake, use it! You're never going to be able to write if you don't read!"

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps the isolation of your childhood helped you to become a writer—because of all the time it left you for reading—lonely though it must have been.

GORDIMER

Yes. . . perhaps I would have become a writer anyway. I was doing a bit of writing before I got “ill.” I wanted to be a journalist as well as a dancer. You know what made me want to become a journalist? Reading Evelyn Waugh’s *Scoop* when I was about eleven. Enough to make anybody want to be a journalist! I absolutely adored it. I was already reading a lot, obviously, but of course I was reading without any discrimination. I would go to the library and wander around, and one book led to another. But I think that’s the best way. An Oxford student who is doing a thesis on my writing came to visit me in Johannesburg the other day. I did something I’ve not done before. I told him, “Right, here are boxes of my papers, just do what you like.” I liked him so much—he was so very intelligent and lively. I would meet him at lunch. He would emerge, and so would I, from our separate labors. Suddenly he brought out a kid’s exercise book—a list, that I’d kept for about six months when I was twelve, of books that I’d read, and I’d written little book reviews. There was a review of *Gone With the Wind*. Do you know what was underneath it? My “review” of Pepys’s *Diary*. And I was still reading kid’s books at the time, devouring those, and I didn’t see that there was any difference between these and *Gone With the Wind* or Pepys’s *Diary*.

INTERVIEWER

Were you publishing stories in the *New Yorker* before you published your first book?

GORDIMER

No. I published a book of stories in South Africa, in 1949. I must have started publishing stories in the *New Yorker* when I was twenty-six. I had one story in the *New Yorker*, and several in journals like *Virginia Quarterly Review*, the *Yale Review*—the traditional places where young writers in the Fifties submitted their work. Then my first book was published abroad—a book of short stories.

INTERVIEWER

You sent your manuscripts around to these magazines?

GORDIMER

No, no, by that time I had an agent. It came about that I had an agent in New York. I never sent anything on impulse to those magazines, because I wasn't familiar at all with American publications. The publications I was familiar with were the English ones. Of course, publishers in those days usually watched magazines. And my first publisher, Simon and Schuster, became interested in me through reading that first story of mine in the *New Yorker*. Katharine White became my editor and friend at the *New Yorker*. She told me, years after, that all those other stories which were in my first book had already been submitted to the *New Yorker* via my agent. But they had been read by the slush-pile people. She had never seen them, and she regretted very much that she hadn't. But of course these things happen. And I don't quite know how that *one* story surfaced.

INTERVIEWER

Who was your agent?

GORDIMER

My agent was an extraordinary man called Sidney Satenstein. He was an extremely rich man who loved writers. He had no children, and I think writers were his children. He had very few writers really, because he wasn't principally an agent. I came to him through somebody who knew him and knew my work and said, "It's ridiculous—you should have an agent abroad." He was such an incredible man—a sort of John O'Hara character, or even coarser, really. He spent half his time flying to Las Vegas to gamble, or to Florida to play golf. He was a kind of caricature rich American. He always had a cigar in his mouth. He was big, and wore the most ghastly clothes—checked trousers and things like that. He was an absolute darling. Of course he gave me a completely false idea of what an agent was. When I met him I was exactly

thirty—though he had taken me on in my mid-twenties—and he was in his mid-sixties. He established a sort of fatherly relationship with me, very fond. Strangely enough, he really liked my writing, which surprised me. One wouldn't have thought that my writing—especially my stories—would have interested *him*. But they did. He was incredible. He knew the circumstances of my life. I was newly divorced, I had a small child—a baby, indeed, eighteen months old—and I had no money. And he really fought for me. If somebody bought something of mine—and after all I was totally unknown—he insisted that I was a hot property. He got sufficient money for me to live on. When Simon and Schuster bought my first book of stories, they wanted to know if I was writing a novel, and indeed I was. And again he pushed them to give me, what would now be considered a *teeny* advance, the amount someone would get to write a line today, but then publishers were not so generous, nor writers so demanding. But at least they gave me a modest sum that I could live on. And once the book was well along, and they saw part of it, Satenstein said to them, you've just *got* to give her more, she's got nothing. So they gave me another advance—all due to him. He used to send me enormous bottles of French perfume. The times I came here—twice—while he was alive, he threw parties for me at the 21-Club, with caviar and sturgeon . . . he had a big heart, and style.

Unfortunately, he died—of a heart attack—just when I began to get known and make a success. He deserved better, because it would have been terribly exciting for him. At least he was able to be thrilled with the response to my first novel. Though not a best seller—I've never been that—it was a big critical success here . . . a completely unknown writer with a front page review in the *New York Times*.

INTERVIEWER

What role do you feel politics and the constant conflict it evokes in South Africa have played in your development as a writer?

GORDIMER

Well, it has turned out to have played a very important role. I would have been a writer anyway; I was writing before politics impinged itself upon my consciousness. In my writing, politics comes through in a didactic fashion very rarely. The kind of conversations and polemical arguments you get in *Burger's Daughter*, and in some of my other books—these really play a very minor part. For various reasons to do with the story, they had to be there. But the real influence of politics on my writing is the influence of politics on people. Their lives, and I believe their very personalities, are changed by the extreme political circumstances one lives under in South Africa. I am dealing with people; here are people who are shaped and changed by politics. In that way my material is profoundly influenced by politics.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see that as an advantage for a writer?

GORDIMER

Not really. Life is so apparently amorphous. But as soon as you burrow down this way or that . . . you know Goethe's maxim? "Thrust your hand deep into life, and whatever you bring up in it, that is you, that is your subject." I think that's what writers do.

INTERVIEWER

If you had grown up in a country that was not politically oppressed, might you have become a more abstract writer?

GORDIMER

Maybe. Take a writer whom I admire tremendously, the greatest American short-story writer ever, Eudora Welty. In a strange way, if she had lived where I've lived, she might have turned these incredible gifts of hers more outward—she might have written more, she might have tackled wider subjects. I hesitate to say this, because what she's done she's done wonderfully. But the fact is that she hasn't written very

much; I don't think she ever developed fully her gifts as a novelist. She was not forced by circumstance to come to grips with something different. And I don't believe it's just a matter of temperament, because my early writing had qualities similar to hers. I got to hate that word about my work—"sensitive." I was constantly being compared to Katherine Mansfield. I am *not* by nature a political creature, and even now, there is so much I don't like in politics, and in political people—though I admire tremendously people who are politically active—there's so much lying to oneself, self-deception, there has to be—you don't make a good political fighter unless you can pretend the warts aren't there.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have the same complaint about Virginia Woolf's novels as you do with Eudora Welty's?

GORDIMER

No, because Virginia Woolf extended herself the other way. I mean she really concentrated totally on that transparent envelope that she'd find for herself. There are two ways to knit experience, which is what writing is about. Writing is making sense of life. You work your whole life and perhaps you've made sense of one small area. Virginia Woolf did this incomparably. And the complexity of her human relationships, the economy with which she managed to portray them . . . staggering. But you can't write a novel like *Burger's Daughter* with the sensibility of a Virginia Woolf. You have to find some other way. You're always trying to find some other way. I'm interested in both ways of writing. I started off by being interested in that transparent envelope.

INTERVIEWER

Was Woolf a big influence when you began writing?

GORDIMER

Midway, I think—after I'd been writing for about five years. She can be a very dangerous influence on a young

writer. It's easy to fall into the cadence. But the content isn't there. The same could be said for a completely different kind of writer like Dos Passos, or Hemingway. You've got to be very careful, or you do if you are a writer like me, starting out with an acute sensibility and a poor narrative gift. My narrative gift was weak in my early novels—they tend to fall into beautiful set pieces. It was only with *The Late Bourgeois World*, which was published in 1966, that I began to develop narrative muscle. From then on, my struggle has been not to lose the acute sensitivity—I mean the acuteness of catching nuance in behavior (not in description, because as you get more mature that falls into place) and to marry it successfully to a narrative gift. Because the kind of subjects that are around me, that draw me, that I see motivating me, require a strong narrative ability.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that your political situation—the political situation in South Africa—gave you a particular incentive as a writer?

GORDIMER

No. For instance, in *Burger's Daughter*, you could say on the face of it that it's a book about white communists in South Africa. But to me, it's something else. It's a book about commitment. Commitment is not merely a political thing. It's part of the whole ontological problem in life. It's part of my feeling that what a writer does is to try to make sense of life. I think that's what writing is, I think that's what painting is. It's seeking that thread of order and logic in the disorder, and the incredible waste and marvelous profligate character of life. What all artists are trying to do is to make sense of life. So, you see, I would have found my themes had I been an American or an English writer. They are there if one knows where to look . . . if one is pushed from within.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel that fiction from relatively non-oppressed countries compares with that produced in countries where the

political situation necessitates a certain amount of political consciousness?

GORDIMER

To me, it's all a matter of the quality of the writing. To me, that is everything. I can appreciate a tremendously subjective and apolitical piece of writing. If you're a writer, you can make the death of a canary stand for the whole mystery of death. That's the challenge. But, of course, in a sense you are "lucky" if you have great themes. One could say that about the Russians in the nineteenth century. Would they have been the wonderful writers they are if they hadn't had that challenge? They also had the restrictions that we chafe against in South Africa—censorship, and so on. And yet it seems on the face of it to have had only a good effect on writing. Then I think it depends. It can have a deleterious effect. In South Africa, among young blacks who are writing—it's difficult for them to admit it, but they know this—they have to submit to an absolute orthodoxy within black consciousness. The poem or the story or the novel must follow a certain line—it's a kind of party line even though what is in question is not a political party, but it *is*, in the true sense of the word, a party line. For example, nobleness of character in blacks must be shown. It's pretty much frowned upon if there's a white character who is human. It's easy enough to understand this and it's important as a form of consciousness-raising for young blacks to *feel* their own identity, to recite poems which simply exalt blackness and decry everything else, and often to exalt it in crude terms, in crude images, clichés. That's fine as a weapon of propaganda in the struggle, which is what such writing is, primarily. But the *real* writers are victims of this, because as soon as they stray from one or two clearly defined story lines, they're regarded as . . .

INTERVIEWER

Traitors. Are there many blacks writing and publishing in South Africa?

GORDIMER

There are a lot and there's a fairly good relationship be-

tween black and white writers. Literature is one of the few areas left where black and white feel some identity of purpose; we all struggle under censorship, and most white writers feel a strong sense of responsibility to promote, defend and help black writers where possible.

INTERVIEWER

Burger's Daughter was banned three weeks after it was published, wasn't it?

GORDIMER

Yes, and it remained banned for several months. Then it was unbanned. I was pleased, as you can imagine. Not only for myself, but because it established something of a precedent for other writers, since there are in that book blatant contraventions of certain Acts. In that book I published a document that was a real document, distributed by the students in the 1976 riots in Soweto, and banned by the government. It's in the book with all the misspellings and grammatical mistakes . . . everything exactly as it was; and indeed that's important because, as Rosa points out, these kids rioted because they felt their education wasn't good enough. And when you read the text of that pathetic little pamphlet you can see what the young blacks meant, because that's as well as they could write at the age of sixteen or seventeen, when they were ready to matriculate. So here is one example where, indeed, I flagrantly crossed the line to illegality. Now that the book has been unbanned, it's going to be a difficult thing for the censors to ban other books on evidence of such transgressions.

INTERVIEWER

Why was the book unbanned?

GORDIMER

If I hadn't been a writer who's known abroad and if this hadn't been a book that happened to receive serious attention at a high level abroad—it obviously made the censors

feel rather foolish—the book would not have been released. So there we are.

INTERVIEWER

Is it common for a book to be unbanned?

GORDIMER

Well, not so quickly. Of my two previous books, one, *A World of Strangers*, was banned for twelve years, and the other, entitled *The Late Bourgeois World*, for ten; after that length of time most books are pretty well dead.

INTERVIEWER

How does a book get banned?

GORDIMER

First of all, if the book is imported, the authorities embargo it. In other words, it's just like any other cargo arriving at the docks. It is embargoed at Customs and the customs officer sends the book off to the Censorship Board. He's got a list of suspects. For instance, a South African writer like myself would be on it, you see, because they know the kind of subjects I've chosen, and, in any case, I've had three books banned previously. So would somebody like James Baldwin; several of his books were banned. Then there's another way that books get embargoed with the possible outcome of a ban. After normal distribution, somebody, some Mother Grundy, old busybody, reads a book that's already in the bookshops, objects to it, and sends it off to the Censorship Board with a complaint. On the recommendation of just one person, a committee will read the book to see if it's "objectionable." But while it's being read by the censors, it's under embargo, which means that although there are copies in the bookshops the bookseller can't sell them; he's got to put them away, take them off the shelves. Sometimes the book is then released. It happened to my novel, *A Guest of Honour*; it happened to *The Conservationist*. *The Conservationist*, I think, was held by the censors for ten weeks, which

is iniquitous because the first ten weeks in a book's life are crucial from the point of view of sales. Then it was released by the Director of the Board. The members of the censor's committee—there are a number of those, usually with three people comprising a committee—read the book, each writes an independent report, and if these concur that the book should be banned or released, right, it's done. If they don't concur, then a fourth person has to be brought in. If they concur that the book is undesirable, then it is banned. The author isn't told. The decision is published in the government gazette which is published once a week. And that's the end of the book.

INTERVIEWER

What happens then? Is it like what happened with *Ulysses*? Do people scrounge around frantically trying to get hold of it and hide it when policemen walk by?

GORDIMER

People do, people do. Books are usually banned only for sale and distribution but not for *possession*, so that if you've already bought the book you may keep it; but you may not lend it to me or the person across the road and you may not sell it.

INTERVIEWER

You can't lend it?

GORDIMER

No. This, of course, is perfectly ridiculous. Everybody lends banned books all the time. But people are very nervous, for instance, about buying them abroad or having them sent. They're rather too timid about that. They don't like to have to smuggle them in.

INTERVIEWER

So there isn't much smuggling going on?

GORDIMER

Some people don't, some do. But with some of us, it's a

point of honor always to do this.

INTERVIEWER

To smuggle?

GORDIMER

Yes, of course. It's a legitimate form of protest. But, unfortunately, when a book is banned, very few copies get around.

INTERVIEWER

Getting back to the idea that oppressed societies produce better writers . . .

GORDIMER

Well, I don't know. I think in the case of Latin American countries, they seem to have experienced so many forms of oppression and for so long that it's become a normal state. But notice that they all write about the same thing . . . the themes are as obsessive as the African ones. *The* theme among the remarkable Latin American writers is the corrupt dictator. Nevertheless, despite the sameness of theme, I regard this as the most exciting fiction in the world being written today anywhere.

INTERVIEWER

Which Latin American novelists?

GORDIMER

García Márquez, of course. Hardly necessary even to name Borges. Borges is the only living successor to Franz Kafka. Alejo Carpentier was absolutely wonderful. *The Kingdom of the Earth* is an exquisite little novel—it's brilliant. Then there's Carlos Fuentes, a magnificent writer. Mario Vargas Llosa. And Manuel Puig. These just roll off my tongue quickly; there are others. But always there's this obsessive theme—the corrupt dictator. They all write about it; they're obsessed by it.

INTERVIEWER

I suppose that an oppressed culture such as South Africa's

creates the possibility for heroes to exist, and that this is why some of your novels, such as *A Guest of Honour* and *Burger's Daughter*, have heroes as their motivating force.

GORDIMER

Well, you know, it amazes me . . . I come to America, I go to England, I go to France . . . nobody's at risk. They're afraid of getting cancer, losing a lover, losing their jobs, being insecure. It's either something that you have no control over, like death—the atom bomb—or it's something with which you'd be able to cope anyway, and that is not the end of the world; you'll get another job or you'll go on state relief or something of this nature. It's only in my own country that I find people who voluntarily choose to put everything at risk—in their personal life. I mean to most of us, the whole business of falling in love is so totally absorbing; nothing else matters. It's happened to me. There have been times in my life when I have put the person I was in love with far ahead of my work. I would lose interest, I wouldn't even care if the book was coming out. I'd forget when it was being published and I wouldn't worry about the reception it got because I was in such a state of anguish over some man. And yet the people I know who are committed to a *political* cause never allow themselves to be deflected by this sort of personal consideration or ambition.

INTERVIEWER

How do you think romantic love manifests itself in families such as Rosa's, where people's passions lie in politics?

GORDIMER

This is what interested me so much, and this is what I partly tried to explore in the relationship between that girl and her family, who loved her, exploited her, but at the same time felt that they were doing this not for each other or to each other but because the *cause* demanded it.

INTERVIEWER

We get only very brief glimpses of the love affair between

Burger and his wife. In fact, the reader hardly gets any picture either of their relationship or of Rosa's mother at all.

GORDIMER

That was one of the points that's fascinated me about such people: you could know them very well, and yet even in their intimate relations with one another they remained intensely secretive; it's part of the discipline that you have to have. I have a very, very close friend—no character in the book is modeled on her, I might add—but much that I know or have discovered intuitively about such people started with my fascination with her. She has been my closest friend for many years—she's a political exile now—and we've talked nights and days. She's one of the few people for whom I suppose I'd put myself physically at risk if there were to be cause. That's long ago. There are so many things I don't know about her that normally would come out in confidences between people who are as close as we are, and it's because of her political commitment that I can't ask her and she won't tell me. I think that this could extend even to family relationships. It's part of the discipline that the more you know, the more dangerous you are to the people around you. If you and I are working together in an underground movement, the less I know about you the better.

INTERVIEWER

We've talked about the South American writers you admire. What about other writers?

GORDIMER

Lots of novelists say they don't read other novelists, contemporary ones. If this is true, it's a great pity. Imagine, if you had lived in the nineteenth century and not read the writers that we now turn back to so lovingly, or even if you had lived in the twentieth century and hadn't read Lawrence or Hemingway, Virginia Woolf and so on. At different times in my life I've—liked is not the word—I've been psychologically *dependent* upon different writers. Some have remained influential in my life and some haven't, and some I suppose

I've forgotten and do them an injustice by not mentioning. When I first began to write, I wrote short stories, and of course I still do; I've written a great many. It's a form that I love to write and to read. I was very influenced by American, Southern, short-story writers. Eudora Welty was a great influence on me. Years later, when I met Eudora, visited her in Jackson, there were such parallels between the way she was living, even then, and my life: a black man was mowing the lawn! There was a kind of understanding. Of course, this really had nothing to do with the fact that I thought she was a superb short-story writer. Katherine Anne Porter was an influence on me. Faulkner. Yes. But, again, you see, one lies, because I'm sure that when we were doing the five-finger exercises of short-story writing, Hemingway must have influenced *everybody* who began to write in the late Forties, as I did. Proust has been an influence on me, all my life—an influence so deep it frightens me . . . not only in my writing, but in my attitudes to life. Then later came Camus, who was quite a strong influence, and Thomas Mann, whom I've come to admire more and more. E.M. Forster, when I was a young girl; when I was in my twenties—he was very important to me. And I still think *Passage to India* is an absolutely wonderful book that cannot be killed by being taught in the universities.

INTERVIEWER

In what way did Hemingway influence you?

GORDIMER

Oh, through his short stories. The reduction, you know, and also the use of dialogue. Now I think a great failure in Hemingway's short stories is the omnipresence of Hemingway's voice. People do not speak for themselves, in their own thought patterns; they speak as Hemingway does. The "he said," "she said" of Hemingway's work. I've cut these attributions out of my novels, long ago. Some people complain that this makes my novels difficult to read. But I don't care. I simply cannot stand he-said/she-said any more. And if I can't

make readers *know* who's speaking from the tone of voice, the turns of phrase, well, then I've failed. And there's nothing anyone can do about it.

INTERVIEWER

It certainly enforces concentration when one is reading your novels.

GORDIMER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

The dashes are very effective.

GORDIMER

Oh, that's very old. It started with Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

INTERVIEWER

What technique did you use that was the same?

GORDIMER

A kind of interior monologue that jumps about from different points of view. In *The Conservationist*, sometimes it's Mehring speaking from inside himself, observing, and sometimes it's a totally dispassionate view from outside.

INTERVIEWER

It's a much more standard narrative technique than that of *Burger's Daughter*.

GORDIMER

Well, no, it isn't you know. In *The Conservationist* you've got interior monologue and you have a real narrator. It's not always Mehring speaking. But the line between when he is and when he isn't is very vague, my theory being that the central personality is there, whether it's being observed from outside or whether from inside—it's the same entity.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned that the way in which you came up with the structure of *Burger's Daughter*, in which Rosa is always speaking to somebody, was from the idea that when one is writing one always has a listener in mind.

GORDIMER

Oh, no, not in your writing, in your *life*. I believe that in your life, in your thoughts when you are alone, you are always addressing yourself to somebody.

INTERVIEWER

And you are not doing this when you write?

GORDIMER

No, because you're no longer yourself when you're writing; you're projecting into other people. But I think in your life, and sometimes even in the conduct of your life, you're imagining that some particular person is seeing your actions. And you're turning away, sometimes, from others.

INTERVIEWER

How has Faulkner influenced you? Do you see any similarities in the structure of *Burger's Daughter* and, say, *As I Lay Dying*?

GORDIMER

No, none at all, and I don't think there could be any influence there. I think the big time when people influence you is when you're very young and you start to write; after that you slough off what you don't need and you painfully hammer out your own style.

INTERVIEWER:

There's a similarity between the way your method of narration in *Burger's Daughter* and some of Faulkner's books address themselves to the relative nature of "truth."

GORDIMER

Yes. Well, of course it is a method that points out the rela-

tivity of truth. The point I'm trying to make is about the relationship between style and point of view; in a sense, style is the point of view, or the point of view is the style.

INTERVIEWER

Right, and that's why you choose to structure your narratives in the way that you do.

GORDIMER

And then it was Proust who said that style is the moment of identification between the writer and his situation. Ideally that is what it should be—one allows the situation to dictate the style.

INTERVIEWER

So that you are expressing a point of view, with the style that you choose, about the way life is in South Africa.

GORDIMER

Yes. I'm expressing a point of view of the way life is for that particular person and the people around her (in the case of *Burger's Daughter*), and, by extension, a view of life itself.

INTERVIEWER

In Conor Cruise O'Brien's review of *Burger's Daughter*, which appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, he says that your novel is constructed with a "properly deceptive art." He talks about how the construction makes the book seem as if it were a book in which nothing happens, and then several cataclysmic things do, in fact, happen. I was wondering if you have any response.

GORDIMER

For me again, so little of the construction is objectively conceived. It's organic and instinctive and subconscious. I can't tell you how I arrive at it. Though, with each book, I go through a long time when I know what I want to do and I'm held back and puzzled and appalled because I don't know before I begin to write how I'm going to do it, and I

always fear that I can't do it. You see, in *Guest of Honour*, I wrote a political book, a book that needed certain objective entities relating to and acting upon the character's life in particular. And I wrote that book as a conventional narrative so that at the point where there was indeed a big party congress there was no difficulty then in presenting it almost like a play. Then I wrote *The Conservationist*, where I chose to ignore that one had to explain anything at all. I decided that if the reader didn't make the leap in his mind, if the allusions were puzzling to him—too bad. But the narrative would have to carry the book in the sense of what is going on in the character's minds and going on in their bodies; the way they believed things that they did *really were*. Either the reader would make the leap or not, and if the reader was puzzled now and then—too bad. In other words, the novel was full of private references between the characters. Of course, you take a tremendous risk with such a narrative style, and when you do succeed, I think it's the ideal. When you don't, of course, you irritate the reader or you leave him puzzled. Personally, as a reader, I don't mind being puzzled. Perhaps the writer doesn't know the consequences implied in his/her books, because there's a choice of explanations; and, as a reader, I enjoy that. To me, it's an important part of the exciting business of reading a book, of being stirred, and of having a mind of your own. And so, as a writer, I take the liberty of doing this.

INTERVIEWER

You don't consciously create a complete structure before you begin writing a novel?

GORDIMER

No. For *Burger's Daughter*, perhaps four or five pages of very scrappy notes for the whole book. But, for me, those half-sentences or little snatches of dialogue are tremendously important; they are the core of something. And I've only got to look at them, and know that that's the next stage in the book that I'm coming to.

INTERVIEWER

Is this the way you usually write your novels?

GORDIMER

Yes. With me it's really a very natural process once I get started. An organic process.

INTERVIEWER

How long do you prepare before you get started?

GORDIMER

It's so difficult for me to say because, looking back at *Burger's Daughter*, for example, I know that I've been fascinated by the kind of person Rosa is for many years. It's as if the secret of a life is there, and slowly I'm circling, coming closer and closer to it. Perhaps there are other themes that present themselves but finally spin off instead of drawing me to them. I suppose one's ready for different things at different times in one's life. And also, in a country where so much is changing, the quality of life around one is changing; so that perhaps I wouldn't be attracted now to write the book that I wrote ten years ago and vice versa.

INTERVIEWER

So you feel that the way your books are written is more an inevitable phenomenon than a conscious choice.

GORDIMER

I don't think any writer can say why he chooses this or that or how a theme impinges itself. It may have been around for a long time and then a stage comes in your life when your imagination is ready for it and you can deal with it.

INTERVIEWER

I wanted to ask you about *The Conservationist*, in which death is almost an obsessive theme. There are certain sections where it is continually brought up in ritualized ways: the man hopping up from his grave in different people's minds

throughout the book, and the ritual of killing the goat to get back at Solomon's injury. . .

GORDIMER

In *The Conservationist* there's a resurrection theme, and that is also a political theme. At the end of the book there's a disguised message. The slogan of the biggest banned liberation movement, a kind of battle-cry widely adopted, is the African word, "mayibuye." This means, "Africa, come back." You can see the whole idea of resurrection is there. And if you look at the end of *The Conservationist* you'll see that this thought is reworded, but it is actually what is said when the unknown man is re-buried: that although he is nameless and childless, he has all the children of other people around him; in other words, the future. He has people around him who are not his blood brothers and sisters but who stand for them. And that he has now been put with proper ceremony into his own earth. He has taken possession of it. There's a suggestion of something that has been planted, that is going to grow again.

INTERVIEWER

This theme is repeated in one of your short stories—"Six Feet of the Country."

GORDIMER

Yes. But the repetition is in reverse: "Six Feet" was written years before *The Conservationist*. Oddly enough, that early story is based on a true incident.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a fascination with death?

GORDIMER

Not consciously, but then . . . how can any thinking person not have? Death is really the mystery of life, isn't it? If you ask, "What happens when we die? Why do we die?" you are asking, "Why do we live?" Unless one has a religion. . . . Without a religious explanation, one has only the Mount

Everest argument: "I climb it because it's there. I live because there is the gift of life." It's not an answer, really, it's an evasion. Or, "I think my purpose on this earth is to make life better." Progress is the business of making life more safe and more enjoyable . . . fuller, generally. But that justification, it stops short of death, doesn't it? The only transcendent principle is that you are then seeking to improve the human lot for future generations. But we still don't get past the fact that it's a turnabout business; it's your turn and then it's mine, and life is taken up by somebody else. Human beings are never reconciled to this. In my own life I am made puzzled and uneasy by my attitude and that of others to death. If somebody dies young it's so terrible, it's such a tragedy, and the sense of waste is so strong; you think of all the promise that was there. And then if people live into old age, there's the horror of decay, especially—it's awful to say—but especially with exceptional people; when you see their minds going and their bodies falling to pieces, and they want to die and you want them to die, then that's equally terrible. So it's the mere fact of death that we can't accept? We say it's terrible if people die young, and we say it's terrible if they go on living too long.

INTERVIEWER

Are you a religious or mystical person?

GORDIMER

I'm an atheist. I wouldn't even call myself an agnostic. I am an atheist. But I think I have a basically religious temperament, perhaps even a profoundly religious one. I went through a stage in my life when I was about thirty-two or thirty-three years old—when I was very fascinated by the writings of Simone Weil. In the end, her religious philosophy left me where I was. But I felt that there was something there that answered to a need that I felt, *my* "need for roots" that she wrote about so marvelously. I couldn't find the same solution.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about Conor Cruise O'Brien's idea about there being Christian overtones in *Burger's Daughter*?

GORDIMER

Well, I'm thinking of that. I'm sure that many of my friends, people who know me well, laughed because they know that, as I say, I'm an atheist. But he hit on something that is there in me, a certain inclination—more than that—a pull. Perhaps, brought up differently in a different milieu, in a different way, I might have been a religious person.

INTERVIEWER

Then there is the resurrection of the black man in *The Conservationist*.

GORDIMER

But of course the idea of resurrection comes from the Greeks, from the Egyptians. You can begin to believe in a collective unconscious without having religious beliefs.

INTERVIEWER

I've noticed that sensual elements play a key role in your writing: smells, textures, sexuality, bodily functions. You don't write about the so-called "beautiful people," the leisured class of South Africa, and the beautiful environment in which they must live. In fact, I noticed that almost all of the white women in your *Selected Stories* are physically and mentally both highly unattractive and middle-class. Does this reflect the way in which you view white colonialists in your country?

GORDIMER

I don't make such judgments about people. After all, I'm a white colonial woman myself, of colonial descent. Perhaps I know us too well through myself. But if somebody is partly frivolous or superficial, has moments of cruelty or self-doubt, I don't write them off, because I think that absolutely every-

body has what are known as human failings. My black characters are not angels either. All this role-playing that is done in a society like ours—it's done in many societies, but it's more noticeable in ours—sometimes the role is forced upon you. You fall into it. It's a kind of song-and-dance routine, and you find yourself, and my characters find themselves, acting out these preconceived, ready-made roles. But, of course, there are a large number of white women of a certain kind in the kind of society that I come from who . . . well, the best one can say of them is that one can excuse them because of their ignorance of what they have allowed themselves to become. I see the same kind of women here in the U.S. You go into one of the big stores here and you can see these extremely well-dressed, often rather dissatisfied-looking, even sad-looking middle-aged women, rich, sitting trying on a dozen pairs of shoes; and you can see they're sitting there for the morning. And it's a terribly agonizing decision, but maybe the heel should be a little higher or maybe . . . should I get two pairs? And a few blocks away it's appalling to see in what poverty and misery other people are living in this city, New York. Why is it that one doesn't criticize that American woman the same way one does her counterpart in South Africa? For me, the difference is that the rich American represents class difference and injustice, while in South Africa the injustice is based on both class *and* race prejudice.

INTERVIEWER

What about the "beautiful people" of South Africa?

GORDIMER

They're featured very prominently in an early book of mine called *A World of Strangers* but very rarely since then, until the character of Mehring in *The Conservationist*. They are not the most interesting people in South Africa, believe me . . . although they may regard themselves as such.

INTERVIEWER

Is it intentional that so often the physical details of char-

acters are not brought home strongly in your work? One gets a very strong sense of the mind's workings in major characters, but often a very limited sense of what they actually look like.

GORDIMER

I think that physical descriptions of people should be minimal. There are exceptions—take Isaac Bashevis Singer. He very often starts off a story by giving you a full physical description. If you look very closely at the description, of course it's extremely good. He stamps character on a twist of the nose or a tuft of red beard. My own preference is for physical description to come piecemeal at times when it furthers other elements in the text. For instance, you might describe a character's eyes when another character is looking straight into them so it would be natural . . . a feature of that particular moment in the narrative. There might be another scene later, where the character whose eyes you've described is under tension, and is showing it by tapping her foot or picking at a hangnail—so if there was something particular about her hands, that would be the time to talk about them. I'm telling you this as if it were something to be planned. It isn't. It comes at the appropriate moment.

INTERVIEWER

In the introduction to your *Selected Stories*, you say that: "My femininity has never constituted any special kind of solitude, for me. In fact, my only genuine connection with the social life of the town (when I was growing up) was through my femaleness. As an adolescent, at least, I felt and followed sexual attraction in common with others; that was a form of communion I could share. Rapunzel's hair is the right metaphor for this femininity: by means of it I was able to let myself out and live in the body, with others, as well as—alone—in the mind." You go on to say you "question the existence of the specific solitude of woman-as-intellectual when that woman is a writer, because when it comes to their essential faculty as writers, all writers are androgynous

beings.”

What about the process of becoming a writer, of becoming an androgynous being? Isn't that a struggle for women?

GORDIMER

I hesitate to generalize from my own experience. I would consider it an arrogance to state my own experience as true for all women. I really haven't suffered at all from being a woman. It's inconceivable, for example, that I could ever have become interested in a man who regarded women as non-beings. It's never happened. There would be a kind of war between us. I just take it for granted, and it has always happened, that the men in my life have been people who treated me as an equal. There was never any question of fighting for this. I'm somebody who has lived a life as a woman. In other words, I've been twice married, I've brought up children, I've done all the things that women do. I haven't avoided or escaped this, supposing that I should have wished to, and I don't wish to and never wished to. But, as I say, I don't generalize, because I see all around me women who are gifted and intelligent who *do* have these struggles and who indeed *infuriate* me by allowing themselves to be used by men. It's the mental abuse that I think of, really, women who give up their development as human beings because they're willing to subordinate this to some man. As for my attitude to feminism . . . I always have become indignant over the fact that women in professions don't have the same working conditions or salaries as men. In my own country—I don't know how it is here—as soon as a woman is married, if she's a schoolteacher, for example, she's paid less because she's regarded as a poor risk: she's probably going to have a baby and interrupt her career. And if she comes back to teaching when she's older, she is still paid on a lower grade because she's married. This I think is disgusting. I see it as part of the whole question of human rights and disaffected groups in various societies.

INTERVIEWER

Certainly it must appear even more clearly in that light

from the perspective of someone living in South Africa.

GORDIMER

Black women have so many terrible disabilities that they share in common with men—the oppression of racism—that the whole feminist movement means something quite different there. Unless feminism is seen as merely part of the general struggle for black liberation, and the struggle of all, white and black, against racial oppression, it has no validity in South Africa, in any view. So as far as writing is concerned, I cannot help generalizing from my own experience that, in writing, sex doesn't matter; it's the writing that matters. I can't see why any publisher should care whether you're a man or a woman if you've written a good book. Or if you've written a bad book that he thinks he can make a commercial success of . . . there are plenty of those.

INTERVIEWER

You also say in the introduction to *Selected Stories*: "I know that writers need solitude and seek alienation of a kind every day of their lives." How do you gain your own solitude, and maintain it within your family? Where do you write?

GORDIMER

Of course now my family's grown up and it's easier. But I did manage to maintain it when my children were young, I suppose, by being rather ruthless. I think writers, artists, are very ruthless, and they have to be. It's unpleasant for other people but I don't know how else we can manage. Because the world will never make a place for you. My own family came to understand and respect this. Really, when my children were quite small they knew that in my working hours they must leave me alone; if they came home from school and my door was closed, they left and they didn't turn on the radio full blast. I was criticized for this by other people. But my own children don't hold it against me. I still had time that I spent with them. What I have also sacrificed, and it hasn't been a sacrifice for me, is a social life; and as I've got

older, I'm less and less interested in that. When I was young I did go through some years when I enjoyed party-going very much and stayed out all night. But in the end, the loss next day, the fact that I had a hangover and that I couldn't work, quickly outweighed the pleasure; and, as time has gone by, I've kept more and more to myself. Because a writer doesn't only need the time when he's actually writing—he or she has got to have time to think and time just to let things work out. Nothing is worse for this than society. Nothing is worse for this than the abrasive, if enjoyable, effect of other people.

INTERVIEWER

What conditions do you find to be most conducive to writing?

GORDIMER

Well, nowhere very special, no great, splendid desk and cork-lined room. There have been times in my life, my God, when I was a young divorced woman with a small child living in a small apartment with thin walls when other people's radios would drive me absolutely mad. And that's still the thing that bothers me tremendously—*that* kind of noise. I don't mind people's voices. But Muzak or the constant clack-clack of a radio or television coming through the door. . . well, I live in a suburban house where I have a small room where I work. I have a door with direct access to the garden—a great luxury for me—so that I can get in and out without anybody bothering me or knowing where I am. Before I begin to work I pull out the phone and it stays out until I'm ready to plug it in again. If people really want you, they'll find you some other time. And it's as simple as that, really.

INTERVIEWER

How long do you usually work every day? Or do you work every day?

GORDIMER

When I'm working on a book I work every day. I work

about four hours nonstop, and then I'll be very tired and nothing comes anymore, and then I will do other things. I can't understand writers who feel they shouldn't have to do any of the ordinary things of life, because I think that this is necessary; one has got to keep in touch with that. The solitude of writing is also quite frightening. It's quite close sometimes to madness, one just disappears for a day and loses touch. The ordinary action of taking a dress down to the dry cleaner's or spraying some plants infected with greenfly is a very sane and good thing to do. It brings one back, so to speak. It also brings the world back. I have formed the habit, over the last two books I've written, of spending half an hour or so reading over what I'd written during the day just before I go to bed at night. Then, of course, you get tempted to fix it up, fuss with it, at night. But I find that's good. But if I've been with friends or gone out somewhere, then I won't do that. The fact is that I lead a rather solitary life when I'm writing.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a time of day that's best?

GORDIMER

I work in the morning. That's best for me.

INTERVIEWER

How long does it usually take you to write a book?

GORDIMER

It depends. The shortest has been about 18 months. *Burger's Daughter* took me four years.

INTERVIEWER

Four years of steady writing?

GORDIMER

I wrote one or two other things, small things. Sometimes when I'm writing I get a block, and so I stop and write a short

story, and that seems to set me going. Sometimes when I'm writing a book I get ideas for stories, and they're just tucked away. But alas, as I get older, I get fewer ideas for short stories. I used to be teeming with them. And I'm sorry about that because I like short stories.

INTERVIEWER

What about writer's block? Is that a problem for you?

GORDIMER

No. And I say so, as you see, with hesitation and fear and trembling because you always feel that that demon is waiting behind the back of your brain.

INTERVIEWER

You have the short story to loosen you up?

GORDIMER

Yes, and occasionally I do some nonfiction piece, usually something involving travel. For me, this is a kind of relaxation. During the time I was writing *Burger's Daughter* I did two such pieces.

INTERVIEWER

You don't even have minor fits of procrastination, endless cups of tea or things like that?

GORDIMER

No, no. Though I do have, not blocks but . . . problems moving on from one stage to the next; particularly when I've got something done with and it's worked well. For instance, I finished that chapter with Brandt Vermeulen, you know, the nationalist in *Burger's Daughter*, which went unexpectedly well. I simply wrote it just like that and it all came right. I had been dreading it. I had been dreading getting the tone of voice and everything right. And then, knowing where I was going on from there, there was suddenly an inability to get out of that mood and into another; and so there

were perhaps a few awful days; because when that happens, I don't stop and do something else. I sit in front of that paper for the normal time that I would be writing. And, then, well, I break through.

INTERVIEWER

There's no specific routine that gets you from the bedroom or the living room into the writing room, bridging that terrifying gap between not writing and writing?

GORDIMER

No—that's the advantage if you're free to choose the time you're going to write. That's the advantage of writing in the morning. Because then one gets up and in one's subconscious mind one knows: I am going to write. Whatever small thing you have to do, such as talking to other people at breakfast, it's only done with one part of you, so to speak; just done on the surface. The person with whom I live, my husband, understands this and has for a very long time. And he knows that to say to me at breakfast, "What shall we do about so-and-so?" or, "Would you read this letter?"—he knows that isn't the time to ask. I get irritable, and irritated, I don't want to be asked to do things then. And I don't want to phone an order to the grocer at that time. I just want to be left alone to eat my breakfast. Ideally, I like to walk around a bit outside, which you can do, of course, with a garden. But I often think that even that becomes a kind of procrastination because it's so easy then to see a weed that one has to stop and pull up and then one sees some ants and wonders, where are they going? So the best thing to do is to go into the room and close the door and sit down.

INTERVIEWER

Do you go through much revision of your work?

GORDIMER

As time goes by, less and less. I used to. When I was young, I used to write three times as much as the work one

finally reads. If I wrote a story, it would be three times the final length of that story. But that was in the very early times of my writing. Short stories are a wonderful discipline against overwriting. You get so used to cutting out what is extraneous.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever find critics useful?

GORDIMER

Yes, but you must remember they're always after the event, aren't they? Because then the work's already done. And the time you find you agree with them is when they come to the same conclusions you do. In other words, if a critic objects to something that I know by my lights is right, that I did the best I could and that it's well done, I'm not affected by the fact that somebody didn't like it. But if I have doubts about a character or something that I've done, and these doubts are confirmed by a critic, then I feel my doubts confirmed and I'm glad to respect that critic's objections.

INTERVIEWER

Frequently writers say they don't read reviews because even one bad review among ten shining ones can be devastating.

GORDIMER

Of course, it depends very much on the reviewer. There are people who are not reviewers, one or two, to whom I give my books to read, perhaps even in manuscript. I am sick with apprehension while they are reading them. And certainly there are certain reviewers I would be very wounded by if they were to say, "Well, this one's rotten."

INTERVIEWER

But this hasn't happened yet.

GORDIMER

Not yet. With *Burger's Daughter* I've had, out of perhaps fifty or sixty reviews, two bad ones.

INTERVIEWER

You say that writers are androgynous. Do you recognize any difference between masculine and feminine writing, such as say, Woolf's vs. Hemingway's writing?

GORDIMER

Hemingway is such an extreme example, and his writing is really an instance of machismo, isn't it? Henry James could have been a woman. E.M. Forster could have been. George Eliot could have been a man. I used to be too insistent on this point that there's no sex in the brain; I'm less insistent now — perhaps I'm being influenced by the changing attitude of women toward themselves in general? I don't think there's anything that women writers don't know. But it may be that there are certain aspects of life that they can deal with a shade better, just as I wonder whether any woman writer, however great, could have written the marvelous war scenes in *War and Peace*. By and large, I don't think it matters a damn what sex a writer is, so long as the work is that of a real *writer*. I think there *is* such a thing as "ladies' writing," for instance, feminine writing; there are "authoresses" and "poetesses." And there are men, like Hemingway, whose excessive "manliness" is a concomitant part of their writing. But with so many of the male writers whom I admire, it doesn't matter too much. There doesn't seem to be anything *they* don't know, either. After all, look at Molly Bloom's soliloquy. To me, that's the ultimate proof of the ability of either sex to understand and convey the inner workings of the other. No woman was ever "written" better by a woman writer. How did Joyce know? God knows how and it doesn't matter. When I was a young woman, a young girl, I wrote a story about a man who had lost his leg. He couldn't accept this, the reality of it, until he was sitting recuperating in the garden and saw a locust that had its leg off; he saw the locust struggling because it felt its leg was still there. I don't know how I wrote that story, somehow I just imagined myself into it. A psychiatrist once told me it was a perfect example of penis envy.

INTERVIEWER

Is there anything, new or otherwise, that you hope to do with your writing in the future?

GORDIMER

I would always hope to find the one right way to tackle whatever subject I'm dealing with. To me, that's the real problem, and the challenge of writing. There's no such feeling as a general achievement. You cannot say that because I have managed to say what I wanted to say in one book, that it is now inside me for the next, because the next one is going to have a different demand. And until I find out how to write it, I can't tackle it.

INTERVIEWER

In other words, you don't know the question until you have the answer?

GORDIMER

Yes. I would like to say something about how I feel in general about what a novel, or any story, ought to be. It's a quotation from Kafka. He said, "A book ought to be an icepick to break up the frozen sea within us."

—Jannika Hurwitt

Crystal River

Charlie Smith

I

I was on the back porch washing greens when Harold drove around the side of the house with a stolen canoe on top of the truck and a bushel of oysters in back.

"I thought you were down fishing on the flats," I said as he came up the steps with the oysters in a sack over his shoulder. "Your Mama said you'd be down there all week."

"That's right," he said. "I was planning to."

He dropped the sack and pulled half a dozen oyster knives out of his pocket. "Throw that stuff out," he said looking at the greens. "We need to put these babies in the sink."

"Just a minute," I said.

I lifted the sopping greens in a mass and mashed them into a pot. "Let me put them on the stove."

"Just put them in the fridge," he said. "We'll need the pot."

I went into the kitchen, found a couple of ham hocks in the refrigerator and put them with the greens to simmer. When I came back Harold was dumping oysters into the sink.

"Where'd you get the cuties?" I asked.

"Panacea. And they are just delicious."

"Did you try one?"

"Of course. You got horseradish?"

"Sure."

I went inside and got it out of the fridge.

"We got to clean these things off first," he said when I set horseradish, tabasco, ketchup, saltines, bowls and forks on the plank beside the sink. "You remember those oysters we got in Savannah?"

"The muddy ones?"

"Yeah. We had to wash them all afternoon."

"They were good."

"Ugm."

He had poured most of the bushel into the sink. I mixed sauce in a bowl, selected the shortest of the knives and began to open.

"You want one?" I said.

"You crazy?" He speared the biggest one with a fork, dipped it in sauce and ate it without a cracker.

"Christ," he said, "nobody but you can eat your sauce."

"I like it hot."

"You sure do." Gold sand stuck to his wrists and to the back of his hands.

"How come you came back from the flats?" I said.

"Teddy got sick." Teddy was his brother, a pill addict and drunkard with a penchant for rifling the medicine cabinets of any house he happened to be in and swallowing whatever he found that might carry a charge. "He was mixing wine and phenobarbs—I had to carry him in this morning to get him pumped out."

"Jesus. Is he okay?"

"Yeah, he's fine, fine as Teddy gets. But it knocked us off the flats. On the way back I stopped for this bushel, and I figured that since I was already primed for a trip I'd come over and see if you wanted to go down Crystal River. You want to?"

"It might be a good idea. Where'd you get the canoe?" It

had Fort Benning Rec. Dept. stenciled on the bow. There were a couple of deep dents in the aluminum near the center.

"It's one I relocated from the Army," he said.

"Didn't they miss it?"

"I told them I lost it on the Toccoa. The water was too high and when we went under it got away from us and we couldn't catch it."

"Sounds like a rough trip."

"Terrible."

He went out to the truck and came back with a bag of ice that he dumped over the cleaned oysters in the sink. "There," he said, tossing the bag on the floor and picking up a knife. "I'm ready to go. Come here you sweet succulents."

"Hold on a second," I said.

I went in the house and got the vodka out of the freezer.

"Now you're talking," he said as I set the bottle on the shelf behind the sink.

We stood at the sink shucking oysters and sipping vodka, looking out through the screen at the warm March sunshine leaning into the garden. The cocker pup from next door came up the steps and scratched at the door and I let him in. He curled up under the sink and went to sleep.

We ate through the end of the afternoon into the evening.

At five the Amtrak train roared by down beyond the garden fence on its way to Miami. From the porch we could see passengers eating supper in the dining car.

Later we drove up to the store for milk and came back and made a stew. We ate the stew, with a side-dish of greens, at my work table in the dining room then went back out on the porch and finished the rest of the oysters. They were delicious to the end, cold and salty, full of sea water.

"It's like eating the ocean," Harold said as he banged one of the last, hard-to-open shells on the lip of the sink. "That's what I told Lola."

"She like oysters?"

"Not much. I had to turn them into poetry to get her to try the first one."

"Ugm. Frieda was like that."

"Wouldn't eat them?"

"Not at first. Then she couldn't do without them. The last time I saw her we went down to Appilachicola and she out-ate me by half. Finished sixty-three and eight bottles of Blue Ribbon."

"I guess she got the hang of it. You going to see each other any more?"

"No. The divorce'll be final in two weeks and I don't expect we'll have much to talk about after that. Everything's been settled."

But then I could see her that minute. Leaning over the hoe to pluck a flower from a potato vine. Jelly, jelly, I yell, and her hand swings to cover the backs of her thighs. Jack, is it so? she would say, and I would get up from the steps, cross the garden and take her in my arms, saying, No, it isn't. Your legs are beautiful. And I would drop to the ground and kiss her knees as she threaded the flower into my hair.

"I'll miss her," Harold said.

"Well, you ought to go see her."

"I probably will."

"Give her my love."

"You betcha."

We finished the oysters and dumped the shells into the sack. Harold took the sack out to the garbage. I carried the vodka into the living room, lighted the lantern and when Harold came back we had a final drink sitting in the wicker chairs in front of the empty fireplace.

"It's getting colder," Harold said. "It'll be cold tomorrow."

"You think we'll be all right on the river?"

"I don't see why not. You've got your duck bag, don't you?"

"Yes. What about you?"

"I just got a piece of cotton, but I can wrap up in a poncho."

We finished the drinks, I blew the lantern out and we went into the bedroom and got into my bed.

I woke during the night with Harold's hand in my groin.

"I can't sleep," he said.

"All right."

I turned around, slid down under the quilt and, as I had done so many times since our childhood, took him in my mouth. He smelled just like a woman. I sucked him until he was ready to come then pulled away and let him catch it in his hand.

"Have you got a towel?" he said when he finished.

"In the bathroom."

He got up and got it.

"I was horny," he said when he had crawled across me and slid back under the covers.

"Ugm."

"You want to come?"

"I don't think I can."

"Don't you feel bad?"

"I don't feel much of anything."

We hadn't turned on the lights. I kissed him on the lips, rolled away and went to sleep.

II

I lay in bed in the first gray light thinking, I am a man here, I inhabit this life. I heard Harold rummaging in the kitchen. The morning train came through, bound for Chicago, rattling the window panes. I reached over my head and touched vibrating glass. This hooks me into that run, too, I thought, I'm plucked onto the line, too.

"I think we ought to make this the rule, Harold," I called.

He stuck his head in the door. He had on my old felt hunting hat.

"Make what?" he said.

"Your getting up early to take care of things."

"Jack, my boy," he said, pulling the hat down fore and aft, "I was just getting my turn out of the way. Don't you have any pots?"

"They're under the sink."

I got up, pulled shirt, pants and sweater out of a pile on the dresser and put them on.

He was throwing cans of food into a cardboard box on the dining-room table when I came out.

"Got to get some Viennas," he said. "Can't go into the wilderness without Vienna sausage."

"And saltines," I said. "Jesus, it's cold." I opened the refrigerator and looked in. "Did we drink all the vodka?"

"Don't start that. We got to stay sober until noon at least."

"Okay." I took the pot of greens out. Liquid broke the gray rind of pork grease as I set it on the table.

"You want coffee?" I said.

"I wouldn't mind it."

I fired the percolator and went into the bathroom. Through the window I could see frost in the garden. Broccoli and peas bent over by cold. No Frieda there. Here, only Harold and me, in the oldest of partnerships, still rubbing up the life between us. I collected my kit. When I flushed the toilet I could hear water running onto the ground below the house.

We drank coffee and ate cold greens from the pot. Harold didn't mention last night and I didn't bring it up either; we had long since stopped talking about those things. But when I got up to go into the bedroom for my gear I bent in passing and kissed him, lightly, on the crown of his head. He looked up from his bowl of greens with amused eyes. "Run one out and run another one in," he said. "That's how it works."

"Yeah, boy," I said.

In the bedroom I stuffed clothes into a plastic bag and got my tent and sleeping bag from the closet.

Harold carried the box of food to the truck and put it in the back.

"Anything else?" he said.

"Snackers."

"We can stop at the store."

Behind us the sun was climbing into pines as we pulled out on the road. Davis Kreps, my across-the-street neighbor pulled himself in his wheelchair one-handed along his front

porch toward the day's first warm spot. I waved to him across Harold's lap. His good hand came up and he shouted something I couldn't catch.

"Davis is drunk already," Harold said throwing a wave.

"He's never undrunk," I said.

We passed the house-that-never-spoke, Willis Faver's old family place that he had let fall back into a ruin of weeds and bamboo after his mother died, and pulled up under a tasseling yellow pine in front of the store.

"Have you ever been in Willis's Mama's place?" I asked.

"No."

"He didn't even take the curtains down after she died. Everything's still there. There's a pump organ in the living room and hand-painted pictures on the walls."

"Hand-painted, huh?"

"And out in the shed bamboo's grown up between the bumper and the fender of his Mama's old Buick."

"I'd like to have that."

"Me too." The gassed-up memory.

We pushed through the door into the store.

Fruit—oranges, apples, tangelos—was piled in bins along the wall, bright as lights. Old potatoes in wire-footed racks, eyes sprouting. Frosty glassed-in drinks. An old red-headed woman, Mrs. Harley Cantrell, was eating cheese and crackers off a newspaper behind the counter.

We want snackers: olives, green and black; pork rinds; canned boiled peanuts; kosher pickles; hot sausages—could we have half a pound of rat cheese, please?

"I got pickled eggs in the truck," Harold said.

"Mrs. Cantrell," I said, "you ever pickle eggs?"

"I wouldn't have them in the house," Mrs. Cantrell said, smiling. "Where you boys off to?"

"Crystal River."

"That down in Florida?" she said, not too enthusiastically.

"Yes'm."

She pushed a wisp of hair out of her eyes with the back of her wrist, stacked a cracker with cheese and stuffed it into her mouth.

"I never ate a pickled egg in my life," she said through the mouthful. "That's drinking trash."

"Kept in a jar in the Ponderosa Sugarhouse," Harold said, "right between the pig's feet and the parched peanuts."

"That I couldn't say. This be all?" she said to the pile on the counter.

"Believe so," I said. We each paid half, pulling bills from front pockets.

"You got enough money?" I said on the way out.

"For what?"

"Beer. Goodies."

"Sure."

Blossoms floated in the branches of a dogwood near the street. Two small boys, shirts flapping, pedaled full speed toward town.

"We can get beer at the Line," I said. "Save cash."

"You betcha."

We slipped south through town out into a country of low pastures and thick horizon-hampering woods. Live oaks and cypress hung over black-water ponds. Cabbage palms dying around a red house. A black man peering from an outhouse door.

Ferns sprung green in fire-blackened woods. They're like blueberries in fired fields up north. Come out of nowhere.

"Harold, have you ever eaten a dog?" I said.

Harold plucked his crotch and said that no, he never had, but he had certainly wanted to.

"It's white meat," I said. "Sweeter than pork."

"I'd like to eat Mama's chihuahua," he said. "You eat a lot of it?"

"Only on my travels."

At the top of a rise we passed a sign that said Florida State Line. Across the road from a barn yellow with moss. Silver crocus faded among rusted farm implements.

"The very first bar, Harold," I said.

"I got my eyes open."

We flashed down oak-canopied roads, the canoe an aluminum awning shading our eyes.

A blue-shingled store at the edge of a persimmon orchard rose into view.

"Here it is," I said.

Harold pulled up in a flurry of gravel. We broke from the truck tucking in shirttails and striding. What a cold, clear morning, a few clouds like spuds above the trees. Persimmon leaves unfolding big as oranges.

"A case of Blue Ribbon and a furburger," Harold said to the unshaven man in overalls behind the counter.

"And a what?" the man said.

"Nothing," Harold said. "I thought it was a fly."

The man looked at him and stepped into the back and returned with the case. We paid and I lugged it to the truck.

"Where'd you say the pickled eggs were?"

"In a box in the back."

I pulled the gallon jar out and set it on the seat between us. The beer went on the floor under my feet. I ripped the cardboard open, plucked out two, opened them and handed one to Harold.

"Here you go," I said.

He pulled out on the highway and accelerated to 60 before he took a sip.

"Good as springtime," he said.

"Fine with me."

I let my arm out into the air, making signals at empty fields.

III

The river boiled out of a spring just south of a shade tobacco town on the Panhandle. It ran forty miles, clear as tap water, through woods to the Gulf at St. Lukes. You could sit in a boat in the river and watch blunt silver mullet race upstream over grass and white sand beds. The sand looked firm until you stepped out on it. Then you sank halfway to your knees into an underlayer of coffee-colored mud. In high-

water season the river flooded the woods so that unless you swung hammocks between the trees there were few places to camp. Pickerel grew in the still water near the banks and hyacinths floated in clumps in the stream.

We pulled up in grass behind the high diving board and got out. Harold jumped out of the truck, ran up the diving ladder and looked down into the water.

"These are the ears of the earth," he said. He hopped one-legged to the end of the board and emptied his beer into the spring. "A little poison, dear," he said, "to help you sleep." He unzipped his pants and pissed into the water, leaning back to make a high arc. The urine splashed and made a froth on the water.

"Did I tell you I once pissed off the flying bridge of a cargo ship?" I said.

"No. Did you hit anybody?"

"Just a crate of chickens."

"This piss," Harold said zipping up, "will mingle with waters that flow untrammelled to the sea. My body is now part of the stream, I am the stream, I am a dream of water running."

"From a tap all night."

"Every time I flushed your fucking toilet," he said, "water ran out on the ground. You must have a lush little cesspool under the house." He climbed down and came over to the truck. I was untying the canoe.

"My mushroom garden," I said.

"I'd like to keep Lola there," he said. "Squatted, naked."

"We could have her duckwalk around the backyard in the nude, eating radishes."

He squatted and quacked, " 'Harold, can I get up now?' No, Lola. Keep walking." He duckwalked to the back of the truck. " 'But darling,' " he squealed, holding onto the tailgate, " 'My knees hurt.' Did you ever get Frieda to duckwalk?"

"Yes I did, duck and crab. I made her do it in pantyhose, wearing a wig. She loved everything I made her do." Where was she—blonde and speaking Italian? "Harold," I said, "do

you think there is a timeless quality to rural life?"

"Yeah."

"Timeless and shitless."

We lifted the canoe off the truck, flipped it and carried it to the water. Minnows darted away from the bank as we slid it in. We loaded our supplies and covered them with a poncho.

"Did you bring paddles?" I said.

"I reckon I must have." He lifted a canvas tarp in the truck bed. "Here they are."

Harold was heavier, but because I was more experienced, I took the stern. He got in and I shoved the bow around into the river. I stepped in and pushed us off, the toe of my boot catching in the water. When we were out in the stream I shipped the paddle and let the canoe drift. Harold hunched forward in the bow, his collar up around his ears. The sky was clouding over.

"Imagine that you are De Soto," he said without turning around. "This is what you would have seen." He swung his arm toward cattails and grasses that grew against the far bank. Behind them leafless hardwoods and evergreens tangled with pines.

"De Soto was going the other way."

"I'm sure he had to turn around somewhere."

I uncovered the case and took out two beers. "Here you go," I said, and when he turned around tossed one to him. I held us steady in the current. The river was shallow. We passed over rusty grasses flowing our way. Up ahead a mullet jumped like a spit seed, landed on its side and disappeared. I turned the cold bottle in my hands and leaned forward into a sip.

I could conjure Frieda spinning into sunlight on this cold day. Weeping at a hotel desk in the Yucatán. Do you want to ride in a carriage? No, no, no. Thick hair on her forearms, her nipples still pink at thirty. Frieda, are you throwing snowballs outside of Denver? Are you traveling by train through the mountains? My stomach turned to think of her. We must be careful today not to splash one another. The sky is almost

completely clouded over. High, heavy, light-deceiving clouds.

"What we need is wine," I said.

"Wine?" He turned around.

"Yeah. With beer you have to stop, because it's awkward to paddle with a bottle, but with wine we could just pause for a sip and go on."

"Maybe we can get some."

"There're no stores on this river."

"That's right."

I set the beer between my feet and began to paddle.

IV

We hit Goose Pasture in the afternoon. You round a reedy bend and there it is: a grassy peninsula backed by pines. Two nylon camp tents perched on the bank above the river. A girl stood in front of one of them with her arms stretched above her head. She was naked.

"Jesus Christ," Harold said under his breath. "It's my mother's penis." We shipped the paddles and drifted down toward her. She was tall with black hair to her waist. When she saw us she didn't move.

Don't scare, I thought. Stay where you are. I could take in small breasts and her black pubic hair. We slid up to the bank.

She looked down at us, kicked her leg above her head, whirled and disappeared into the tent.

"*What?*" Harold said.

She reappeared, still naked, carrying a .410 shotgun. It looked like a BB gun, but it wasn't. She pointed it at us.

"Get out," she said.

I felt my face drain and I thought I was going to faint. Was this going to be some kind of robbery? I put my hands on the thwart in front of me and leaned forward, looking up at her.

"*What?*" Harold said, this time to the girl.

"Get out," she said. Harold stepped onto the bank. I crawled over the cargo and followed him.

"Is this Tangiers?" Harold said. "We were supposed to be in Tangiers by dark."

"Shut up," the girl said. She had gray streaks in her hair, but she looked to be about twenty. She directed us with the gun into the tent.

The floor was covered with a blue shag carpet and was piled with down sleeping bags in several colors. A heater burned in one corner. Light filtered through green fabric. There were no poles and the ceiling was high enough for the girl to stand upright.

Harold held his hands out. "I can read palms," he said.

"Shut up," the girl said. "Take your clothes off."

Everything focused on my belt buckle. It was large and brass and it came loose and there was my pubic hair, not covered by underwear. I dropped my pants.

I raised my eyes to her belly. Her pubic hair grew onto her thighs; a faint line of it rose to her navel. I straightened up, unbuttoned my shirt and let it fall to the floor. Harold was naked beside me. His body was white as a chicken's.

"Lie down," the girl said. We lay on our backs on the sleeping bags. They were soft, soft. She leaned the gun against the side of the tent and knelt between us. She kissed first Harold's penis, then mine. His hands fluttered up as she kissed him, he half rose and fell back. His penis wavered and rose. "Some dummy," he said weakly.

She stroked him while she sucked me until I was hard.

She sat up. "You first," she said to Harold. She straddled him and slipped him into her.

"You stand over him," she said to me. She fucked him, with a short tight motion that made her breasts jiggle, while she sucked me. I reached between us and took a nipple between my fingers. It was thick and red as roses. Harold came, but I didn't.

"Ah," she said, "Ah." She flushed across her collar bones.

She let me go, got off him and pushed me down. Harold

lay with his eyes closed, one hand tracing small circles in the hair on his chest.

"You do me," she said to me.

I got on and we went at it. Her legs locked around my waist.

What I imagined was Frieda fucking her lover. She ran her hands down his sides and took him in her mouth. He stuck a finger in her asshole. Thinking of her seemed more dangerous than what I was doing. It made my stomach churn. Frieda spread her ass and let him look.

I came right through both of them, through both of them into the girl. I pressed my palms flat on her temples and rode through, a moan escaping with the fluid. I let my body go loose against her.

"You aren't with me exactly, are you?" was the first thing she said. Where was everybody else? "I like the pattern your hair makes," she said.

"Thank you." I smoothed her hair off her forehead, uncoupled and slid off her. Harold moved up against her other side.

"Do you do this a lot?" he said.

"When I want to."

"Where're the other people?"

"There's no one else."

I pushed up onto my knees and got my shirt. The gun leaned against the wall at the front of the tent, but I didn't reach for it. Harold lay on his side against her, stroking her stomach. Old *ejaculatio praecox* Harold. She watched me dress.

"You don't wear underwear?" she said.

"Not for years."

"Where are you going?" She had wonderfully delicate hands, long-fingered, the nails bitten back.

"Right now?" Palm moist, soft around me.

"In the canoe."

"To the end of the river."

"The river goes underground in the swamp."

"There's a canal."

"I'll go with you."

"Naked?"

"I have clothes."

I looked at Harold. He was sitting up, pulling on his pants.

"We can ride you with us," he said. "You know how to paddle?"

"Sure."

Harold dressed and we went outside and waited for her. Thin snow had begun to fall.

"My, my," Harold said. "Look at this." He waved his hand at flurrying flakes.

"This is a strange thing," he said. Then he laughed. "It's better than fishing on the flats."

We turned as she came out of the tent. She wore jeans and a green down parka and she carried the gun.

"You're not going to start that again?" Harold said quickly.

"Maybe we'll need it," she said.

"Why don't you get one of the bags," I said.

"Okay." She went back into the tent and came out with one of the sleeping bags wadded under her arm.

We climbed down the bank and got into the canoe. The girl got in the middle, making space for herself between boxes. She laid the gun across her legs. The snow danced in a light wind.

I looked back at the tents. No vehicles, no one around anywhere.

"Did you put out the heater?" I asked.

"It's not mine—I didn't bother with it," she said.

V

We pulled up under a high bank. Roots stuck out of raw black earth. Harold jumped ashore and pulled us around. The girl stepped out and I followed.

We climbed the bank to a grassy field. A board cabin with

a screened-in front porch lay back against oak woods.

"Looks all right to me," Harold said. He returned to the boat. The girl and I approached the cabin. Pear and apple trees had been set out in the front yard. They were just head-high. Flower husks and dead tomato vines crawled the ground below the porch. The girl tried the porch door.

"Locked," she said.

"That doesn't matter." Her name was Alene. The door was held by a finger hook. Taped to the screen was a hand-lettered sign that read: No Firearms or Food Inside. I jerked the door open. High-backed rocking chairs were turned around and leaned against the front of the house, their rockers sticking out like old legs kneeled praying. The house door was bolted from the inside.

"Why don't you try a window?" she said.

"I don't want to break something that'll let the cold in." I kicked the door until it broke open. Raw wood snagged off the lock. Alene brushed past me into the house.

"Anybody home?" she called.

The room we entered was dark, sparsely furnished. The curled edge of a straw mat on the floor caught light from the door. I found a kerosene lamp on a table under one of the front windows, lighted it and we walked through the rooms. The bedrooms were pine-paneled, small and depressing, like a damp shirt on a cold day, with their iron bedsteads and their stripped mattresses. The kerosene in the lamps on the tables was dark and clotted. In back was a kitchen with a wood stove and a hand pump and behind it a screened porch with a plank counter along the back side. We reentered the living room as Harold pushed through the front door carrying the ax and one of the food boxes. He balanced a beer on top of the box.

"It's good to be home," he said. "Did you tell them we'd be staying for supper?"

"Supper and breakfast—they said come on in."

He set the box and the ax on the floor.

"You folks going to help any?" he said.

"We've been touring the place."

"I'm not touring," Alene said. "I just wanted to see if the bastards left anything I could use. What a shabby hole."

"Now—you'll get used to it," I said.

"Don't play with me." She picked up the ax and went out on the porch.

"Takes your mind off your worries, doesn't she?" Harold said. We followed her out.

"You could gather a little firewood if you wanted to," Harold said to her. "We'll get the rest of the stuff up." She didn't say anything. She stood against the screen looking out. The river curved through snow flurries around a bend into trees. The way her spine curved, deeply like a hook, as she pressed her belly against the screen, made me want to run my hand up her back. She looked at the river, saying nothing.

"Or whatever you want to do," Harold said. We left the house and returned to the canoe.

We unloaded the boxes and pulled the canoe up onto the bank. Our feet sank in mud as we worked.

Coming up the bank we could hear sounds of wood splintering coming from the cabin.

"Looked to *me* like it needed a little trimming," Harold said.

She was hacking up the rockers.

"Bang them to pieces," Harold said. We went into the living room and set the boxes down. Harold pulled two beers out and handed one to me.

"You might save one of them, Alene," he called. "I'll need to sit down after awhile."

"There're chairs in there," she said. I stood in the door watching her. She used the ax awkwardly, not closing the distance between her hands as she brought it down. She broke the rockers up, though. After awhile she let up and stood back, panting a little. I moved in and gathered up the pieces that lay around her, carried them in to the fireplace, doused them with kerosene from the lamp and lighted a fire.

The fire snapped the chill in the place. I pulled an armchair that was covered with green, rose-flowered cloth up to the fire and sat down to think about where I wanted to sleep.

A light wind whisked snow against the window panes. We should have gotten Alene to bring the other down bags. They had been deep and soft. It was bad to just go off and leave them. It didn't look, though, as if we were going to be able to get her to do anything she didn't want to. Out on the porch she was still chopping. The floor vibrated faintly with the blows.

Harold pulled a gas stove from a box and began to pump it up. On camping trips he always brought plenty of country goodies to eat, but he didn't like to pioneer. I stretched my legs out and sipped the beer, looking into the fire.

"You got sweet potatoes, Harold?" I said.

"Of course."

"What else we going to have?"

"Stew. Artichoke hearts."

"Wonderful. This is a night for artichokes." My mind was dancing around, Frieda somewhere in a sheepskin walking in the snow.

"Here, get me some water," he said holding out a pot. I took the pot, went out to the kitchen and cranked the pump handle. Somebody had sown a garden out back, but it was gone now, dog fennel wands nodding among broken corn stalks. Dark was coming on and the snow blew into trees. The well was either dry or the pump needed priming. I came back through the house.

"I'll get some water from the river," I said.

"Okay."

On the porch Alene was gathering up the split chairs.

"I'm going for water," I said.

"Wait," she said. She ran into the house. I heard the wood clatter against the hearth. She came back out.

"I'll go with you," she said.

We walked through descending night to the river. The snow fell so lightly that I couldn't feel it. Flakes caught on our clothes, hung for a moment, then winked out, like little lights, into the cloth.

Three big cedars grew at the edge of the bank. Their river-side roots were exposed and I grasped them to help myself

down the steep cut, feeling in my palms the softness of the finest roots that hung like whiskers from the larger stock. Alene came down the trail that we had carried the supplies up.

I made my way carefully across the mushy ground over leaves and broken, river-worn branches to the water, knelt and filled the pot. I felt her behind me and then she touched my hair. I looked out at the river that flowed smoothly, the color of coffee, undisturbed by the falling snow. She placed her hands on my shoulders and leaned against me. My knee sank deeper in the mud.

"You guys in the army?" she said.

"Harold used to be."

"Where'd you get the canoe?" She indicated with her foot the government stencil.

"Harold relocated it."

"He did what?"

"He took it."

"They won't come after you?"

"Not down here."

Something, a sadness, seemed to gust out of her thin body. I took her hand that stroked my cheek and kissed it in the palm.

"Are you married?" she said.

"Divorcing."

I looked up. Her gray eyes touched mine.

"How come?" she said.

"I didn't love my wife." I felt, as I spoke, something in me subside and fall away. I had a moment of intense exhilaration. But then, behind it, came something else. As Frieda fell suddenly away, fell away, in the vision I had of her, from the window of her new house where she leaned over the kitchen sink to water ferns, I saw something else rise, another shape, larger, darker, deeper in my life—it was that that held me, that shape that had stood gazing at me all along, inevitable and changeless, and in a moment the exhilaration was gone and I felt a panic that nearly threw me sprawling into the river. I emptied the pot to direct her from tears that had

come into my eyes, but she saw.

"Are you okay?" she said.

"No. I'm not." I refilled the pot. Particles hung suspended in the drawn-up water.

"Well, you'd better straighten up," she said. "I like you."

"Then I guess I'd better—pull myself together."

"You're damn right." She ruffled my hair, leaned down and kissed me on the back of the neck. "That sure is dirty water," she said.

"It's just tannin—acid from cypress roots. It's not dirty and it keeps the water sweet."

"Maybe you know. Let's get out of this stupid snow."

"All right."

We climbed the bank and returned to the cabin, holding hands as we walked.

VI

The bears have moved farther south, deeper into woods—what bears there are—and no panthers cry at night. The ivory-billed woodpecker has not been spotted for a generation and bald eagles, that once nested in the tops of the tallest cypresses, are not seen anymore, as, for that matter, are the old tall trees. But, in the morning, when I came out at first light, there were raccoon tracks in the snow on the front steps and when I walked to the riverbank I saw, as I shook snow from cedar branches, a flock of ring-neck ducks rise from the water. The ducks flew off south beyond trees under a clear sky. I descended the bank and washed my face in the river. I scooped a handful of snow off the canoe gunwale. It tasted of metal. A snow rug lay in the bottom of the boat. I brushed my teeth in the river water and returned to the cabin.

Harold and Alene were asleep. Harold lay on his back in front of the fireplace, his arms out of the bag, a look of dis-

pleasure on his face. I knelt and kissed his open mouth. The saliva rind on his lips tasted of beer. He didn't wake. I looked around and Alene was sitting up with the bag pulled around her shoulders looking at me.

"Are you a queer?" she said.

I held my finger to my lips. "No," I whispered, "but Harold and I are close."

"Close to being queers?"

"He's an awfully fine boy."

"I see." Her eyes sparkled. The way the unzipped halves of the bag hung down her naked chest, like an unbuttoned shirt, excited me. I stood up and stepped over the stove and empty beer case to her. I reached down and touched her gray-streaked hair and she pressed her face against my leg.

"Take your clothes off and get in here," she said.

"All right." She lay back.

The zipper stopped just below a crescent of pubic hair. I undressed, peeled the bag back and got in with her.

Her mouth was hot and sleepy and my lips moved from it across her high cheekbones, over her nose that had a depression in one side of it like an old wound, down her face past chin and unlined neck to her breasts. The inverted nipples unfolded, one after the other as I kissed them. I kissed back and forth between them, bringing them up, keeping them hard, as a flush spread across her chest. I kicked my feet in the bottom of the bag, seeking space.

"In high school they called me sunny side up," she said as I licked a nipple. I raised my head.

"Everybody did?"

"Certain ones. Do you think they look like fried eggs?"

"No, they look like hills in Italy."

"Old and green?"

"Covered with olives."

"And a blue sky and sailboats in the harbor?"

"And boys in striped shirts running down the beach."

"You are a queer."

"Must be." The bag was too tight for me to get my face down to her groin. My fingers fluttered through hair and I

slipped one inside. "Oh," she said, "oh." She took me in her hand and stroked me upward against her body. I wanted to caress her, to hold out against completion until she was soaked with feeling, until we were drowned, but when she touched me the rhythm broke, I rolled onto her, fumbling for connection, and we came together, my backside freezing in the cold morning air.

The bag was too small—when we finished I pulled my sack over us.

"Where did you go to high school?" I said.

"Different places. What were you doing outside?"

"Brushing my teeth." I told her about the ducks. "There was a whole flock of them," I said, "sleeping on the water. The moment I came up, before I could even get a good look at them, they broke into the air, panicking."

She yawned. "You should have shot one. I wouldn't mind a duck for breakfast."

"You wouldn't want to clean it."

"I'd love to eat it."

I pulled my leg loose, slipped down the bag and punched Harold with my foot.

"Harold, wake up and start the fire."

He opened his eyes and looked down his chest at me.

"You crazy?" he said. "I was lying here waiting to hear the sound of rocker boards crackling and all I'm hearing is whump, whump, whump. I'll take a little coffee with cream and a slab of hot cornbread, please."

"A *little* coffee? Here it comes." I threw the bag off and jumped on him. "I always wanted to get you trussed." I tried to hold him, but his arms were free and it was me, quickly, who got held.

"You want to smell something good?" He laughed and pulled my head down into his armpit.

"Jesus, Harold." I squirmed loose and sat up. He threw his arms back over his head and laughed. The hair in his armpits was redder than the hair on his head. The cold hit me and I snaked off him, scrambled up and got into my clothes. Alene lay on her side watching us, the bag pulled up to her

chin, venturing nothing.

With a stick I scraped a place in last night's ashes, piled wood, doused it with kerosene and lighted a fire. I squatted on my heels and held my palms out to the flames. The heat danced on my skin. Alene got up and stood beside me. She warmed herself, making little half turns in front of the fire. Light bustled in her pubic hair. She bent over and with her fingers combed out her hair. A faint, unpleasant odor rose from it.

"You'll catch it on fire," I said.

"Save me the trouble of combing it," she answered, but she moved back a step.

"Where'd the gray come from?"

"Early strain."

"I was wondering," Harold said as he pulled on his pants, "where did those tents at Goose Pasture come from?"

"From somebody," she said twisting her hair into a bun. "You got a pin?"

"No," I said.

"Shit." She let the hair fall loose down her back.

"Well, at least that explains it," Harold said. "Did you get any water when you went down?" he said to me.

"No. I'll go get some now."

I got the coffee pot from the box and went out.

When I returned, as I reached for the house door, I heard inside the sounds of their lovemaking. I retreated down the porch, cleared the top step of snow and sat down. The air was still, the day too cold for birds. I felt completely abandoned, as if, when, last night, I had declared myself free of Frieda (if that was what I had done), I had done so only after another hand seemed offered me, and now, that hand, it turned out, wasn't there. Maybe that is what I had done. Maybe I dreamed Alene as the sweet field I could lay myself down in. "Like that, like that," I heard her say from inside where they rolled. Like that. I dipped my fingers in the cold coffee water, pressed them to my eyelids and rubbed, again, the sleep from my eyes.

VII

I was in the stern, imagining that the ache in my knees was cancer climbing my bones, we were rounding a bend past a sand bar backed by budding black willows, Harold had just reached behind for one of the last beers, when she raised the gun and fired into a low-hanging myrtle across the river.

"Jesus," Harold jumped, "is it Indians?" Then we both saw what she'd hit: a hornet's nest the size of a basketball. She'd shredded the bottom of it.

"Great God Almighty," Harold said. Hornets, black-bodied and big as thumbnails, tumbled from the nest. They didn't fly—it must have been too cold—they spilled like beans into the water. Then a few got their wings and flew sluggishly around the shattered nest. They would have been angry, I guess, if they could.

"They look like dwarfs," Alene said, cracked the breech and tossed the empty shell into the water. "Fly little buggers," she called to them.

"No, you don't want that," Harold said.

She took another shell from the pocket of her parka and reloaded.

"You want to try?" she said to Harold.

"Nah—okay." He set his beer between his feet and took the gun. He smoothed his hair back with one hand, sighted along the barrel and fired. His shot cut the nest loose and it fell into the water among a tangle of branches.

"Now we'll have them with us to the Gulf," I said. "Let me try."

Harold handed the gun to Alene who reloaded it and passed it to me. Hornets floated on the water, humming.

I fired. The shot cut the top out and the nest sagged, deflated, taking water. White crawling hornet pupae murmured in the mess. Shreds of gray nest paper floated among the bodies. I handed the gun to Alene.

"God's wrath on the hornet world," Harold said.

"Shit—mine," Alene said, reloading. She fired again and the nest went under. "Where's another one," she said, "let's find another one." Her eyes danced with glee.

"They'll show up," I said. "Why don't you keep your eye out for some meat."

"Ah, smothered squirrel," Harold said. He looked back at the floating hornet bodies.

"Dog meat," I said. "A fat pup, white with black spots."

"Not again."

"Yes, again—dog meat."

"Dogs?" Alene said. "I try to hit every one I see in the road."

"Of course you do, darling," Harold said.

"Dogs, guineas and children," I said. "I haven't run over a child in nearly a month."

"You remember that one I got up near Thompson?" Harold said.

"That one on the shoulder? Yeah, I didn't think you'd ever get back on the road. What was he doing?"

"I don't know—digging something. Jesus, did he squeal."

"What?" Alene said. "A kid—a nigger?"

"No," Harold said, "a white boy, about ten years old. It was great. His head busted just like a watermelon. Juice everywhere. We had to stop at a filling station to wash it off the front of the car."

"Did you kill him?"

I trailed my fingers in the water—eee, hornets—and wiped them on my pants. "He wasn't walking when we left."

"I think I'll run over Lola when we get home," Harold said.

"You couldn't hit Lola—she's a dodger."

"Who's Lola?" Alene said.

"That's Harold's young woman," I told her. "Lola's a grounds keeper up at Southwest State."

"The insane asylum?"

"That's right. You should have brought her, Harold. We could have rolled her in meal and fried her."

"Wouldn't she be sweet? The last time I talked to her she said she'd decided to take flying lessons. She wants to be a

crop duster."

"Buzz your house on Wednesdays."

"Trip her with telephone wires."

"Poor Lola."

Alene swung the gun in an arc, sighting into treetops.

"Watch for movement," Harold said. "Anything moves, blast away."

We pulled around the bend into a long reach of open water.

"Those hornets," Harold said. "I once dropped a hornet's nest into the boat."

"You did?"

"Yeah. Red Baker and I were doing the Chiporee. I don't know how it happened, but we passed under a nest and Red managed to hit it with his paddle and knock it into the canoe."

"Did you get stung?"

"No. We hit the water at the same time the nest hit the boat."

"How'd you get it out?"

"I reached in with my paddle and flipped it into the water. We stayed submerged until we got out of sight—Jesus, I never moved so fast. I thought we were going to be stung to death."

Sun had burned the snow off; trees dripped water and the ground along the banks was damp and mushy-looking. We paddled around bends where budding willows dragged lank branches in the dark water. The sky was clear, the air thin, sunny and cold.

I swung myself through the rhythm of paddling, my hands chafing, a knot untying in my shoulders, and I thought again of the way paddling a canoe slips you into the heart of things. The first day out is hard, your back aches and your hands hurt, but during the second, aches begin to dissolve and you ease into the flow of the river and after awhile the steady rhythm of paddling, the three-mile-an-hour journey past a landscape that changes as slowly as your heart beats, around bend after bend, each the same in its willows and moss-

backed logs, into reaches long as lakes, is the rhythm of a deeper movement, that we slip into, easy as breathing, as we travel, that replaces whatever madness we have come out of and carries us out of time.

That is how I had explained the lure of river travel. Explained it as I lay on living room rugs drinking tequila, my friends on sofas slipping into mescaline dreams. You become a part of the river, I would say, current and cargo. But that seemed to me now an awful fantasy. Here was the world, today, half-frozen and natural as a goat, concussed hornets floating in a stream. Frieda was there still, green-eyed and frightened of bugs, and I stopped paddling for a moment, thinking of her naked body, and of the eyes of her lover looking. I liked him looking. She pulled her knees up, in my mind, her legs fell open, she touched the scar inside her thigh, her hand drifted to her sex and she spread the lips of it with her fingers. She brought the fingers to her mouth and tasted of herself. I didn't mind—I wanted to dream it. I wanted her legs loose for another in my mind. I wanted them loose in fact. As they were, in fact. I wanted to hold the vision of her, locked in her new lover's arms, tease it out slowly into my mind, even if it hurt, even as it hurt. I had loved her too little, then too much and I couldn't find a path between the two. Blocking whatever path there was stood whatever shape I had seen last night. Beyond her supple, Annie Oakley body, stood that other dark form, that I could not embrace.

I reached forward and stroked Alene's hair.

"Don't get it wet," she said.

The river lay flat as a highway, empty and sparkling in the sunlight.

"What is that?" Harold said.

"What?"

"That sound?"

I listened. "It's the Crystal River shoal."

We rounded a bend between high, palmetto-covered banks and there was the shoal, thrown across the river like a petticoat. I had forgotten it. It was a narrow place where the

river lost depth and fell a couple of feet down a limestone ledge. The water, suddenly cinched and dropped, bucked into plumes of spray. Past a front line of heaving waves the river foamed for a hundred yards toward still water as it widened out and calmed before it bent past a headland of bare oaks.

"You want to stop and take a look?" Harold said.

"Yeah, let's do."

We swung over and climbed the bank through the palmettos. Harold ran ahead kicking his legs high through wet fronds. "What snakes there are, stay still," he cried. He reached the highest point and leaned out over the water that had pushed a white edge of foam against the bank, making *gestures with his hands*.

"Last year in Colombia," he hollered in an English accent, "we ran rivers like this by the dozen." He turned to me as I came up to him, shouting as if I were somewhere else and the river louder. "Do you hear me, Jack? By the dozen. Little river, turn to gin."

"Gin," I yelled, "martini rapids. Vodka collision."

Harold reached down, scooped up sand and bits of plant matter and flung them at the water. "Be calmed, waters," he yelled. "Hornet Harold commands you. I believe we can take it, Jack."

"We have to chance it," I said. "There's no other way. This is an adversary relationship. Mercy, God's good grace, will get us through."

Alene came up. She had a palmetto frond tied around her hair for a headband.

"Cousin Alene," Harold said, "does the situation smell sweet to you? Do you believe Jesus will carry us through?"

"What jerkoff wouldn't," she said.

I put my arms around both of them. I wanted us all to jump in the water. A fine mist wet our faces. Let's do this every day. Let's not ever do anything else.

"Let's go then," Harold said. He ran down the bank yipping as Alene and I followed.

We tucked the poncho around the boxes and shoved off.

Alene sat on the center thwart.

The river flowed sluggishly toward a central chute beyond which reared a six-foot fan of spray; the river, stumbling, had kicked up its own water. We made for that.

"Harold," I called over the noise of water, "stand up."

"What for?"

"In case there's a view."

We all got up. Alene stood on boxes, higher than either of us. Standing, I ruddered us into the center of the channel. The river seemed hardly to move; leaves floating beside the canoe turned lazily in the clear brown current. The bow leaned out over the fall—so slowly—tipped forward, we caught, surged forward the length of the canoe into the high brown wave, Harold striking with his paddle as if the wave were a bear and, as he fell, I felt the bow scrape bottom and then I was in the air, too, grabbing for Alene—wanting her, separately from this, curiously, completely—missing, remembering to hold onto my paddle as I went under, gasping, breath knocked nearly out of me, freezing, fighting up until I surfaced ten yards downstream in waist-deep water, the swamped canoe sagging beside me, empty beer bottles and the gas can floating away out of reach downstream.

We dragged the canoe to shore and tipped it out in the shallows. Everything was soaked except my clothes which were still dry in their plastic bag. Harold built a fire and we hung the sleeping bags in the trees. We stood around the fire naked, shaking with excitement and the cold.

Alene stood with her back to us, the gun cradled against her hip. Goose bumps pimples her buttocks. Harold squatted and cupped his genitals. "What a ride," he said. "What a ride."

"We went straight under," I said.

He laughed. "We didn't make it past the first wave. It was wonderful—it just caught us." He stroked penis and testicles gently upward, looking down at himself. "Unclench, boys," he said.

Alene lay the gun down and went to the canoe. She began to push it back into the water.

"What you doing, babe?" Harold said.

"I want to run it again," she said.

"Let's do," Harold said to me.

So, naked, blue-lipped, chattering, we ran the shoal again.

On the first run Alene took the bow, I sat in the middle and Harold took the stern. Emptied of cargo, we popped through like a cork. After the third run we were too cold to try another. My face felt frozen; I could hardly move my mouth. We pulled the boat ashore and got into dry clothes. The only thing Harold could wear of mine was a sweater. The bags were nearly dry and we spread them out on top of the reloaded cargo. Harold scattered the fire and we pushed off. The sky was clear, the sun white as the moon in the south. Harold began to sing. We passed the bend and put the shoal behind us.

VIII

The sun was going down like a peach into the river and we were still paddling when we heard laughter coming from a cedar grove above a grassy meadow on the right bank. Two red, white and blue striped canoes were pulled up in the yellow grass. We beached in mud and climbed the slope to the cedars. In a needle-floored clearing two couples looked up from a fire on which ribs lay roasting on a grill.

"Hey," one of the men—tall, with a belly—said as we came through trees into the open space. He was drinking something from a white plastic cup.

"All of you stand up," Alene said raising the gun. The plump woman in padded duck hunting pants jerked half a step forward, her toe kicking coals so that the grate tipped and nearly fell, she looked at the tall man and they both rose.

"What do you want?" the other man—gray chin beard and glasses—said in a hard voice. He moved closer to a woman whose hand had frozen among salad greens on a camp table. The tall man stretched his hand over the fire toward the

plump woman, changed his mind and came around and stood beside her.

"What is it?" he said.

"Just get steady and put your hands out in front of you," Harold said. "I've always wanted to talk this way," he added. He held an open pocket knife loosely in his right hand.

"Stay calm," I said to the four of them. I pointed at a cooler under the camp table. "What's in there?" I asked.

"Some beer," the tall man said.

"Jesus, oh, Jesus, fucking robbers," the plump woman said. She looked up into the cedars.

"Shut up," Alene said.

"You got any freckle-face potato chips?" Harold asked.

"What?" the tall man said.

"Or any calico, any red calico?"

"Jesus—what?" he took a step back.

"Stay still," I said, crossed the clearing and got the cooler. I could smell the woman's sweat as I bent down, bitter, like the smell of roaches. I had an impulse to stroke her leg, her thighs were slender in jeans, but I touched only the cooler, picked it up and carried it back to the other side of the fire. Harold speared a sheaf of ribs off the fire with his knife.

"What else have you got that we might need?" he asked over a mouthful. He offered me a hunk of meat, but I didn't want to take it right then.

"Nothing, man," the bearded man said. His army fatigue pants were held up by a white leather belt. A Marine assault knife hung from the belt. "We haven't got any money," he said.

"We don't want money," I said. "We're doing this for love."

"We're doing this to make an impression," Harold said. "We don't want to go down into history only as simple, christian folk."

"You won't," the tall man said. He scratched under his arm. "Listen, you assholes. . ."

"Shut up," Alene screamed. She raised the gun to her shoulder and aimed directly at his face. "We don't want to

hear your side of it."

"Don't!" the woman at the table cried. The tall man blanched. His hands opened and closed—curdled, curdled is the word that came into my mind, but curled is what his fingers did. The woman had screamed the single word 'don't,' but she hadn't moved.

A small breeze slipped vaguely among the cedar branches. Alene lowered the gun.

"Why are you here?" I asked the four of them. "Do you do this often?"

"Nearly every weekend," the tall man said.

"We usually bring retarded children on the outing with us," the woman by the fire said.

"More fucking therapeutic campers," Harold said. "The goddamned woods are being overrun by the afflicted—Jesus. Assholes!" he screamed. "Are you people Americans?"

"We're from Tallahassee," the tall man said. "John and I teach at the university."

"Retardation?"

"Education."

"Well, let this be a lesson to you," I said. "The woods aren't safe."

"*Donnez moi un cerveza*," Harold said. I handed him one. "We don't want to do anything to humiliate you," he said, "but we want you to keep the special children at home. Behind fences. To whom, by the way, am I addressing my remarks?"

The four of them said nothing.

"Well, all right, you're petrified. It's understandable. Let's see," he said pointing with the beer can, "you'll be Split Silk Capone, you'll be Peewee White and you ladies are their mistresses, Patootie and Miss Marvin."

"Oh, stop it," the plump woman cried. She began to weep. "What do they want?" she said.

"Now, now," Harold said, "now, now." He flicked the knife like there was water on it. "When my brother was little," he continued, "and we had to take him to get a shot he would scream at the doctor, 'Wait, I want to tell you

something,' everytime the doc would try to get the needle in. The doctor would hold up and ask him what he wanted to say, but he never wanted to say anything, he just wanted the business to stop." He swigged the beer. "You see, we understand."

"Anything else, Arnold?" he said to me.

"I'm fine," I said.

"Enough, Matilda?"

"Let's go," Alene said.

"Cover the rear," Harold said to her.

We returned down the slope carrying the cooler between us.

"The woods full of the afflicted," Harold said. "It's crazy."

"Keep your asses frozen," I heard Alene say, still in the clearing.

We walked downhill through soggy grass. Daffodils flowered, singly and in clumps along the edges of the meadow. We loaded the cooler into the canoe, got in and waited for Alene. She came running down the slope.

"Wait a minute," she said. She fired from the waist into the bottom of one of the canoes, reloaded and fired into the bottom of the other one.

"You never stop thinking, do you, Alene?" Harold said.

"Come on," she said and jumped in.

We pushed off. The flimsy winter sun was straggling in the river as we paddled into the current.

IX

I just would rather not get up. Where I am is fine with me. It's winter and I'm in the woods tucked in my down bag in this little orange tent.

I watched flames dance against the wall. Alene lay with me, her bag pulled on top of us. She lay on me and her long light weight felt fine. I don't even want supper. I kissed her nipple, rosy as a burn. I held it in my mouth until it

hardened. It's like a little scallop, fluttering open. I touched her low down and she squealed.

"Your hands are cold," she said, pushing me away.

"They'll warm up in a minute." I rubbed them rapidly on my thighs. "There, is that better?"

"Noo," she said.

"What?"

"You're just warming your leg."

I rubbed my hand again, hard, on my thigh.

"How's that?"

"That's fine. Touch me there. I like it when you touch my leg there. Your hands are so soft."

"Comes with the territory," I said and chuckled. I wasn't hungry, I wasn't thirsty, I wasn't anything but content. No, I'd like another beer.

"Harold," I called, "toss me a cartridge."

I watched his shadow rise, disappear and then his head came through the flap.

"Here you go, Commander," he said. "You want one, Sugar-shack?" he asked Alene.

"No."

He squatted in the opening.

"What you doing?" I asked. "Come in out of the cold."

He crawled in, pulled a bag around his shoulders and knelt in front of us. "I'm listening to the jeeps," he said.

We had been hearing them for an hour or more, hearing the straining whine of engines far off, coming through rough country. We reckoned they were jeeps, four-wheel drive something.

"You're dreaming again, Harold," I said.

"I keep listening to them."

There was nowhere for us to go but back on the river. We were camped in the middle of an old raised road that was cut now by the river where a bridge used to cross. Creosoted pilings, bound by steel hoops, leaned in the water; two live oaks, fully-leaved, hung over the stream on either side of the road drop-off. The road itself was grown up in myrtle and alder bushes. From the crown we could look across the tops

of young planted pines on both sides of the river to horizons of old woods, wavering bluely in the distance.

"We've got no trouble, Harold," I said and pulled Alene close. I lay on my side; I raised the beer and took a swallow through the corner of my mouth. We could hear the engines working way back in the woods.

"They're miles away," I said. Alene kissed my chest. Her lips were soft. I held her head against me. I wanted to pull her into my body. It was all right, no matter who was coming.

Harold crawled in close. "This is the last time," he said, "that I ever go camping in the winter."

"How come?" With our bags around us we formed a tent within the tent.

"It's too cold—you can't wash the smoke off you."

"Don't stand so close to the fire."

"Ah—Jack, I'm doing the cooking."

"It would be nice to take a dip."

"Yeah. In the summer we could just jump right out of the boat into the water. You remember that school of minnows we jumped into on the Ochlocknee?"

"I remember. We caught them in our hands."

"Pebbles on the bottom shining like mirrors. There were mussels in the water—you remember?"

"We were scared to eat them."

"Have you guys known each other all your lives?" Alene said. Her legs moved against mine.

"Just about." She drew my hand to her and took a sip of my beer.

"Sounds like it," she said. "You're just a couple of crackers."

"Harold's worried about the jeeps," I said. "He thinks they're coming to get us. Maybe they're tanks, Harold."

"I don't know," he said seriously.

"Who gives a shit?" Alene said.

Harold pulled the bag up and leaned forward until his head was between ours. In the darkness he had made he hummed like an engine.

"nnnnnn, NNNNNN," he went, changing gears.

"You'll never get out, Harold," I said. "You can't take a Ferrari into the swamp."

"Ah, Jesus," he said and rolled onto his back. "If it were summer and I were naked."

"You can get naked," Alene said. "Do. I want to see your peter."

"Okay." He stripped, crawled between us and pulled the bag over the top.

"Let me see," Alene said crouching.

"It's too cold for flashing," Harold said.

"Let me look." Harold turned on his back so she could get to him. She bent close. Her hair swung against his groin. "Your prick's the same color as your skin," she said.

"That's not unusual—it's my prick."

"Jack's is dark—how come it's so dark, Jack?"

"Yeah, Jack," Harold said, "where'd the purple come from?"

"Too much polo, I guess," I touched myself. "I used to worry about it, now I like it."

"Polo?" Alene asked.

"No—a purple dick."

Part of our bodies kept slipping out into the cold. Alene kissed my penis, then Harold's. I stroked the hairs all one way on her arm. She raised her head, listening. With my index finger I traced her profile from her hairline to her chin.

"Quit," she said, "I'm trying to hear." She laughed and fell back. "They're coming to get us," she said.

We were silent.

"I thought the river went underground," Alene said.

"That's some other river," Harold said. "Somewhere else."

I wanted, suddenly, to get out of there. Out of the tent.

"What's there to eat?" I asked.

"Beans and tomatoes," Harold said. "The pot's on the stove."

"You want anything—Alene?"

"No."

I dressed and went out. The sky was crowded with stars. I

descended the bank and washed my face in the river. The water stung my cheeks and hands. Chips of light floated in the river. It was too cold to be out, but I didn't want to be in the tent. I stood up and breathed deeply. I felt the cold way down in my chest.

I returned to the fire and spooned a plateful of beans. I could hear them fucking. Fabric, flesh flapping. What could I do about it? She didn't mind which of us she had. Frieda was a thousand miles away. Wearing one of my old sweaters, shaking frost from her hair. There were birds in the live oak by the river. I heard them when I passed under it. I squatted then sat down in front of the fire.

The sound of the laboring vehicles rose and fell. There seemed to be at least two. I couldn't tell that they were getting any closer—they seemed to be straining in one spot, far back. Maybe they are coming for us. I finished the beans and tossed the paper plate into the fire. The edges browned and caught, a brown stain appeared in the center, the whole plate caught, crumpling. Another beer. Green expensive cooler; Red Label, a brand I never drink. No need for a cooler in this weather. How to keep them from freezing was the worry. The beer was cold and bitter. It made my fingers ache to hold it. I wish I had gloves. I had worried about paddling in cold weather, about my hands numbing from dipping in the water, but it was no trouble. I didn't wet them and the action of paddling kept them warm enough.

I dragged the cooler over and sat down on it. I couldn't stop thinking of Frieda. We had been separated a year and now within at most, two weeks, the divorce decree would appear in my mailbox. I had to let her go. Everyday, since I had started the stumbling divorce machinery more than six months ago I had been telling myself that I have to let her go. Last night, once again, I thought I had, but here she was, still rising like the moon, in my mind. Go on, Frieda, dear, go on. Her hair was blonde, finer than Alene's. She stood, in my mind, in front of the picture window in her cottage at the beach—here, fifty miles from here, in Florida—and kicked her foot higher than her head. It was the one thing she re-

membered from her college dance class ten years ago. It was a wonderful girlish maneuver—she would do it anywhere; in the grocery store, waiting in line for a movie—and it had been, I thought, the first move I had seen Alene make: one high kick before she whirled into the tent and came out with a gun.

Someone grunted in the tent and I heard the sound of damp flesh slapping damp flesh. I got quickly up and went to the riverbank. The bound pilings leaned in the current like old drunk men in overcoats. A tangle of bushes obscured the road on the other bank. The tops of young pines were silvery.

“Good-bye, good-bye,” I called. My voice flew, echoless, into the night. “Good-bye.” If she were here I could throw her in the water. Hypothermia, not divorce, would keep her under. “Good-bye,” I yelled, and again, “Good-bye.”

“What are you hollering?” Harold called from the tent. I turned and saw his head sticking out of the flap. His hair was wild salad. “Be quiet,” he said, “you’ll let them know where we are.”

He crawled out and stood up, fully dressed. He cracked a beer and came over. We looked down the river.

“After these pines it’s marshes all the way to the coast,” he said. “Who were you saying good-bye to?”

“To Frieda.” I held myself in my arms.

“I figured. Is it bothering you?”

“The divorce?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess so. I’m trying to let it go.”

“You ought to.” He took a mouthful of beer and spit a stream of foam into the water. He followed that with a piss.

“Ugm,” he said as he arced it. “The simple pleasures.”

“You’re making a feature of that,” I said.

“I like to put myself into the things I do.” He zipped up and sat down. I sat down beside him.

“Is there any chance you’ll go back with Frieda?” he asked.

“No,” I said quickly. The thought scared me. “I can’t let myself think about it. She’s gone.”

“You were together a long time.”

"Half our lives."

"It makes me sad," he said. I looked at him. His face was turned away, eyes looking downstream. An ache spread through my chest into my shoulders.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's natural. You ought to take a trip."

"I'm on a trip."

"Why don't you do what I did when I quit smoking?"

"What's that?"

"I took my last pack of Luckies out to the garden, dug a hole and buried them, right between the peas and the tomatoes. I said a little funeral service over them. I told them I loved them, but they were dead and good-bye."

"I don't think Frieda would go for that," I said.

"Maybe a photograph. Too bad you didn't marry Lola. I'd help you bury her."

"I'll help *you*."

"First thing when we get back."

"If we do."

He looked at the ground and shook his head. His fair fell forward over his face. He pushed it back.

"I wonder if they're . . . whatever they are, coming this way."

"I don't know. It sounds like they're stuck."

The far away sound rose, grinding, as if trees were down in front of wheels. We were silent.

"This has certainly turned into something, hasn't it?" he said after awhile.

"I'm kind of liking it—it splits the distance."

"What do you mean?"

"We're off here in the boondocks away from our real lives and we're cutting up in this wild way that we never could at home—at least I thought we never could, then I started thinking this is just the way it was when we were kids, running around free, sneaking through the bushes raising Cain. It takes us back."

"Mebbe so," he said.

"You remember when we used to hide out in trees and

jump on each other. We're getting to do it again."

"'Cept we're grown—and it's not each other."

"Adventure has just come along—we do it. Do you mind Alene?"

He chuckled. "I'm enjoying her."

"If that's what it is."

"Something."

He got up and went down to the river where he held his beer can under the water until it filled then threw it out into the stream.

"I'm going to bed," he said when he had climbed back up the bank.

"I'll be along shortly."

He put his hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry, Jack," he said.

I pressed my cheek against his wrist. The hairs were scratchy against my face.

"It'll be all right," I said. He returned to the tent.

"What you been doing?" I heard Alene ask through a yawn.

"Talking to Jack," he said.

I put the beer down beside me and scratched my thighs with both hands. I wished I itched all over. If it were summer I would throw myself in the water. Where did this restraint come from? I would like to float on my back, in this stream, to the Gulf. Lie on my back listening to the wind in the marshes. Well, well, oh, well. I got up, went down to the river and rinsed my face. There was no way to get around the cold. Except by crawling into my warm down bag where I have been momentarily content. The engines kicked, far off. I waited until no sounds came from the tent. Then I went in, too.

When Harold, fumbling in the dark, woke me, I thought he was getting up to pee. But he sat on his bag pulling on his shoes.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"You hear those fucking jeeps?"

In the woods they were still at it.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going outside. I can't stand it."

"Would you guys shut up," Alene said sleepily, but in full command.

"Okay," Harold said. He finished lacing his boots, picked up the gun and went out.

I heard him throw wood on the fire, there was a silence, then a loud whomp and a gust of light that lit up the tent. "Jesus," I heard him say.

"Warmed up, Harold?" I said.

"Damn." Tossed a little gas on the fire.

I chuckled and pulled the bag around my ears. I could hear the engines through the down. Then I thought, well they can see our signal now. I heard a scrabbling then a shirring, leafy sound and twittering as birds left their roost. I poked my head out.

"What the shit are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm getting up here." His voice came from among branches.

"In the tree?"

"Yes, dammit."

"You going to ambush them?"

"I'm going to get up here."

"Holler if you spot them." He was silent a moment then he said, "I forgot about the fucking birds. Christ, it's cold."

I drew my knees up and held myself in the bag. Alene had swum up to admonish, now she was snoring lightly again. The engines whined away in the woods. You lie in your camp and wait to be found. It could be anything coming. Robbers or cops. What could be driving this way at midnight? A squeal rose and fell away. Rose and fell again. Like guineas in the bushes, spooked by a dog. The sound came on. Oh, Jesus God, help.

I got up, pulled on clothes and shoes and went out. I crossed the clearing and looked up in the tree. I couldn't see him up there.

"Harold," I whispered, "where are you?" I was shaking from excitement.

"Help, murder, police," he whispered back.

"I'm coming up," I said.

I grasped the lowest branch, swung myself up and climbed to his perch. He was straddling a limb, holding with one hand to the trunk, about halfway up.

"What are we going to do up here?" I asked when I had settled beside him. I swung my legs in the dark.

"I had to get out of the tent," he said. He had the gun propped against the trunk.

We listened to the motors. They seemed to be getting closer, maybe they were, but it was taking a long time.

"Now the birds are stuck in the cold," I said. Blackbirds, I guess they were.

"I forgot they were up here. They almost made me fall—I thought the tree was exploding. Did you like that gas?"

"Ugm."

I thought of the birds huddled on a mud bank, lost in the bushes. Frightening birds seemed a worse error than robbing campers, if error it was.

The vehicles came on. My heart sped up, I could feel it hitting heavily in my chest. Leaves rustled in a light wind, as if the birds were still in the tree. I could see over bushes that the road petered out in the planted pines. If they were coming, they would have to come some other way, else crush trees. Maybe they were driving bulldozers. Maybe there was another road we couldn't see.

"We're as bad off here as in the tent," I said.

"No, we're not." Leaves blocked much of our view. Harold swung back and forth, peering out.

"Don't you remember," I said, "when we played army when we were kids—the guys up in trees always got trapped."

"I just want to see what's coming," he said.

"Well, I'm going down."

"Suit yourself."

I climbed down, threw another stick on the fire in passing and crawled into the tent. Alene woke as I came in.

"What are you crazy people doing?" she said. She spoke through her hair without raising her head.

"We were in the tree."

"What? What tree?"

"The one by the river. Harold's still there. Let me in."

"No. I want to sleep. Why is he in the tree?"

"The jeeps, outlaw buggers after us."

"We're the outlaws."

"We sure are." I got into my bag without taking off clothes or shoes. She turned her face away.

"Go to sleep," she said.

"I don't know if I can." I lay on my back, heart pounding. Cold came through the bag, through the top and bottom.

"Don't lose yourself, boy," she said.

I lay there listening. The engine had hooked to my heart-beat. It must be coming for us. In the night, in this wilderness. I turned over, pulled the bag over my head and pushed myself up on my forearms. In the cave I made I couldn't see, but I could hear. Nothing to think about now: they were coming.

I heard a scrabbling in the tree, then feet running across the clearing and Harold appeared at the flap.

"I see lights," he said. "Let's get out of here."

"Okay." I jumped right up. "Come on, Alene," Harold said shaking her. "Somebody's coming."

"Oh, shit," she said, but she got up and began pulling on her clothes.

Harold collected the supplies while Alene and I wadded up the bags and jerked the tent down. We carried everything to the canoe and threw it in. Alene and Harold got in. I paused on the bank. Harold sat in the bow blowing into his cupped hands.

"Come on," he said.

"Just a minute." I scrambled back up the bank to the clearing and scattered the fire. I stomped the coals into smoke. I could smell the rubber soles of my shoes as I beat the flames down. Vehicles coming through the pines. O, Christ Jesus. I ran to the boat.

"Okay, okay," I cried. I pushed off with the paddle. We glided out into the river. A new moon was up in the west.

It held the old moon in its arms. We pulled steadily away from camp, from stalkers drawing closer. Along the banks the reeds were topped with silver. It was a fine, clear night, deep in the heart of winter. This was no time to be on a river. We left the sound of engines behind the third bend but we paddled steadily on into darkness.

"Diminished, I'm diminished," Harold cried.

"Not you, Harold—it's me, goddamn, paddle," I said.

We could follow the course easily past banks darker than the river. Stars shone in the water. I paddled carefully, without entering the rhythm I tried to make each plunge of the paddle into the water as soundlessly as possible.

Pines gave way to grass; tidal mud stank on the banks. The breeze died. We paddled steadily, as the river, bunched against the sea mouth, twisted on itself.

"Yip, yip," Harold cried, held his empty beer can under until it filled and tossed it ahead of us into darkness. It splashed heavily. "Mullet, jump," he cried, "lost, lost."

"And by the wind grieved," I said, "o mullet, come back again. Alene, hand me a beer."

She threw one back, I cracked it and paddled holding it. The moon had slipped below the horizon. I wanted out of this boat and I placed my hands on the gunwales and rocked it to let them know. Harold lurched and nearly fell in.

"Watch it," he said. I looked back at the thin froth of bubbles trailing. No sounds from the rear but our own wake gurgling.

"Harold, you're not diminished," I called forward, "you're just unsatisfied."

"I am reduced," he replied, "below the level of essentials."

"You people are fools," Alene said. The collar of her parka was turned up around her ears. It pushed her hair up in a dome around her head.

"That's not true," I said. "Harold's upset because we ran out on this cold river."

"Without even snow to obscure us—I can say that. I can tell what I've done."

"What is it, Harold?"

"I've outlawed us," he said.

"You saw lights."

"Maybe it was St. Elmo's fire."

"Swamp gas."

"Farts in the duckweed, quack, quack." He reached behind him into the cooler and drew out another beer.

Tense and angry in the cold, we were little huddling paddling centers of warmth out here in Florida. We wanted to take chances—Harold had run as much because of plain energy as because of marauders—we wanted to frisk, festoon the journey with splashes—I did, at least—but it was cold, the water stung like bees, this was a flimsy boat, it was night and we had to be careful. Alene spit into the water out of a scowl. Harold took his song softly up. It was "Foggy, Foggy Dew," a tune both of us had known since childhood. I joined him, remembering my father singing it when I was little and the fright it gave me to think that the woman of whom he sang—who was clearly not my mother—was the woman he loved.

"You sing like frogs," Alene said.

"But we sing, sugar," Harold answered, "we sing."

He hummed and took it up again. A beautiful woman whom he lost in the foggy, foggy dew.

The tide ran against us. We had to keep paddling or lose ground. My neck ached. When Alene began to curse I shipped my paddle, knelt forward and embraced her. "I am *freezing*," she said.

"Do you want to paddle?"

"No."

"Then there's nothing we can do."

"Let's stop." She held herself tightly under my arms.

"We're near the end of the river—we can stop there. There's nothing along here but mud and grass." Hungry crabs staring out of holes.

"Fuck," she said.

"Why don't you have a beer."

"I don't like beer."

"Okay." I got back on my seat.

We rounded a nearly 180-degree bend. Sticks with strips of cloth tied to the tops marked the channel. I tucked my head and paddled.

The sky lightened in the East. The day came up fair. The river broadened as we approached St. Luke's and a breeze came up, walking the water toward us. Gulls rose from pilings in front of an abandoned marina and wheeled above us crying. An old barge lay half out of the water on the bank, thin waves lapping at the pilothouse. Flour dust floated in patches on the water. A freighter loaded at the mill, its lights faintly gleaming. We passed the city docks. A man in jeans and a blue workshirt swept trash down the public boat ramp. He didn't look up. We slipped past the point where the old Spanish fort slept under live oaks and cedars hung with moss and headed west along the shore into the refuge. Grass alternated with stretches of gray, seaweed strewn sand. Grassy islands floated in Oyster Bay, tiny as yards. We reached a beach in the deepest bend of marshy cove, pulled in and came ashore. Grass grew back from the beach to a sand road and a stand of cedars. A sign on a post in shallow water said: St. Luke's National Wildlife Refuge No Camping No Fires. We spread the poncho on the grass in front of a bank of yaupons, threw the bags down, crawled in and went to sleep under a fair, empty, frozen sky.

X

I woke out of a dream to the sound of geese honking, my heart throbbing like a sting. Harold and Alene were asleep. I got up and walked down to the water. A flock of Canada geese swam out near the point jostling and talking among themselves. The bay was in a flat calm. Shaggy-headed islands hung low on the horizon far out. One or two had

stands of pine rising out of the grass.

In the dream I had been a kind of houseboy for Frieda in a house that I was unfamiliar with. I ran errands and cleaned, I guess. She would smile at me on her way out in the morning. We had been lovers, but we were no longer. I never saw the man she was with now. She teased me, laughing, as she whirled by in a blue dress; I could hear them talking above the sound of a television in the next room. In the morning I would find their empty glasses and rumpled sheets. Even in the dream I felt a pressure to act but could not. Then, for a brief period, the scene shifted and I was walking alone down a sandy road under a canopy of huge live oaks. I was completely at peace. Everything was solved. Later I was at Frieda's again, but I remembered the peace that filled me on the road, and I strained in sleep for the rest of the night, half-awake always it seemed, to find my way back there.

I touched my wrist and found the racing pulse. It wasn't going to tell me anything—I knelt and dipped my fingers into the cold water, but I didn't touch myself—better sleep in the eyes than salt. The bay was empty but for the geese, not even oystermen out.

“Good morning,” someone said behind me. I turned around. It was an old woman in a long house dress, a gray cardigan sweater and sneakers. She watched me from the road.

“Hello,” I said. She crossed the grass, glancing at Harold and Alene, and came up to me.

“Camping?” she asked.

“Yes'm.” Her white hair was tied back in a scarf. She was eating a grapefruit half with a spoon.

We looked out at the geese, without saying anything. She spit a seed into the sand. I was glad to see somebody.

“You live here?” I asked.

“For fifty years,” she said. She swung her arm toward a green roof among pines. “I live up yonder,” she said. “I used to live with my brother, but he died five years ago. Now I'm the only one here.”

She spat another seed. “It's a forsaken place,” she said.

That was the first time I had heard someone use a word like that in real life. She said it simply, as a fact. There was no emotion in her face or in her voice. I felt a pain in my chest, suddenly, like a heart attack. I filled with something and I wanted to sit down. Things were simpler than I had thought. You just lived quietly and there life was, honking in the bay. In my dream I had walked on the road happy as a ghost. She looked at me.

"You feel all right?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, it'd be terrible if you did—you got a white face."

"I been out of the light," I said.

"Hadn't we all." She looked out at the bay. "When I was a girl this bay was full of geese. We used to scoop feathers off the water for pillows. You could fill a mattress in a morning." The geese bobbed in the water, honking.

"I wish I had one," I said. "Let me sit down here." I sat down on the sand. Cold came through my pants. I felt like things were getting solved whether I wanted them to or not. Frieda was lost to me no matter what I did. I had wanted to hold her even if I had to imagine her naked in her lank-haired lover's arms. I didn't care, didn't care. But there was something else, something else besides watching through a crack in a hall door as my wife fucked another man. Things could be released. I was going to break if I didn't let go my hold. And here, this woman walks up in sneakers, her freckled hands now holding her sweater around her, a man's sweater with buttons carved from antlers . . . perhaps her brother's sweater. If the place was forsaken she seemed all right. I couldn't say. Perhaps the sweater was her brother's. But what could this sadness be if it wasn't for Frieda?

"Why, you know it snowed here evening before last," she said abruptly. "It was the first snow I've seen in ten years."

"It caught us on the river," I said.

"Which river?"

"Crystal."

"I don't care much for the woods in these kinds of days," she said.

"It didn't do us much good either."

She turned and looked at Harold and Alene who lay close against each other, in separate bags, asleep.

"That looks like a hard way to do it," she said.

"Well, we're not orphans. We're out here for fun." Did she mean fucking?

"I believe indoors is where I'd look for it. But then," she said, "the woods is wide and you can find God's beauty in there."

"It goes both ways."

"I reckon." She squeezed grapefruit juice into her mouth. "If y'all want something hot to eat you can come up here to the house—I'm going to be eating lunch directly."

"We'd like that."

"By myself I get out of the habit of cooking, what with just one person. But y'all are welcome to come. I've got some soup."

"We will then."

She turned to go, then stopped. "I'm out here walking for my doctor," she said. "He says it helps my blood and I have to do it three times a day." She swung her arm as if she might throw the grapefruit husk, but then she let her hand fall still holding it. "I don't mind the walking," she said. "I think I could look out at this bay all day long. I've learned that now." She started away.

"You and your friends come up to the house if you want," she said half turning back.

"All right. We'll be there when I can get them up."

"Good-bye then."

"See you later."

She walked away up the road, bending forward slightly, as if she had walked for a long time with a cane that was no longer there.

I looked out. The geese were too far away to be scared by us. Unless Alene took a notion to bag one for brunch. But a .410 wasn't going to kill from here, not with quail shot in the load.

I ran a few steps down the beach and slowed to a walk.

Thin waves, like the remnants of our own light wake, slipped noiselessly up the sand and fell back. Small blue crabs hunkered in the clear water near shore; they scurried away as I passed. The sky was high and white, the sun shone weakly through. There was nothing on the point but grass giving up to water. I turned around and came back.

"O, children," I called when I reached the camp, "time to rise."

Harold looked up.

"Doggie bag," he said. "You, Jack, bring my doggie and my doggie bag. Are the cops out there?"

"In three Mercedes outboards," I said kneeling on my bag. "They're armed with .12 gauge pumps and they say this time they're not fooling."

"Tell them I'll be with them shortly." He yawned. "Is that geese honking?"

"Sure is."

"My Lord, look at them." The geese had drifted out toward the center of the bay; they were still far out.

"I used to come down here hunting with my daddy and the preacher when I was little," he said. "Must have been down here half a dozen times without ever firing a gun."

"Firing one now wouldn't set the table."

He sat up. "Look at them — just talking to themselves. Was somebody here?"

"Yeah. An old woman; she lives up there. She said this was a forsaken place."

"Forsaken by whom?"

"The county commissioners, I guess. She asked us up to lunch."

"I'm for that."

"Well, let's go." I shook my shoulders. I was nervous. I wanted to keep moving and I didn't like the way Harold was sucking his teeth. I wanted to run across the land. I got up and walked down to the water.

Harold had told me a story once of a friend of his in Vietnam who had fallen out of a helicopter. They had been in a field getting picked up, his friend had climbed aboard, the

helicopter had taken off, but about fifty feet above the ground it made a sudden lurch and his friend fell out the open door. He landed on his back in the field ("I could have caught him," Harold had said) and immediately tried to get up.

"We had to hold him down," Harold had said. "He kept saying over and over, 'I got to go, I got to go,'—his eyes were wild, no, not wild, just focused on something else; he rolled back and forth in our arms."

"It was strange," he had said, "he was broken up inside and he thought he could run away from it—from his body."

I kicked a clot of seaweed into the water. It seemed, at that moment, all I wanted to do, too—run my ass down the road. I went over to the canoe and got a pickled egg out of the jar. I wonder what the freezing point of vinegar is. Silver fingerling fish played around the stern of the canoe. For yards out I could see the bottom, the sand ridged like muscles.

"You down there martyrizin?" Harold called. "You decided to remain aloof?"

I turned around. "I've decided you don't know how to pickle eggs," I said.

"What?" He came up, pulling my sweater over his head. He spoke through wool. "You say that to the culinary wizard of the country?" His rusty head popped through. "Here, let me have a bite." I gave him the egg.

"They haven't been in long enough," he said chewing. "I just set them up last week."

"And more pepper," I said, "they need more hot pepper."

"That's your affliction," he said, "which reminds me—I was thinking about oysters last night. We ought to stop at Pony's on the way back and get some."

"And some smoked mullet."

"Oh yes—but I heard they don't have it anymore. The town passed an ordinance against burning inside the city limits, so they can't run the smoker."

"Eejits."

Alene had risen and was bent over tying her bag. What a fine ass in jeans. She had on one of my sweaters, too. She

came down to us, carrying the bag.

"Which way now?" she said. She threw the bag in the canoe.

"Up there." I pointed at the green roof.

"What for?" She pushed her hair back with both hands.

"An old lady asked us up to lunch."

"Is that who you were talking to?"

"It certainly was." I touched her breast through the sweater. Soft nipple sleeping.

"Are those geese?" she asked. She shaded her eyes with her hand though the sky was not bright.

"Yes," I said.

"Why don't you shoot one?"

"Alene—we can't shoot everything. That woman who was just here told me that when she was a girl they used to gather down off the water and make pillows out of it."

"Isn't that something." She reached into the canoe and pulled out the gun. "Let me see if I can hit one."

"Ah agh," I said. "Don't you do that." I grabbed the gun by the barrel and held it pointed away down the beach.

"Quit it," she cried trying to jerk loose.

I pulled the gun up, it fired into the sky and I took it away from her. She reached for it, then dropped her hands.

"You shitpiss," she said. Her eyes were cold and murderous. She was willing to shoot me. Something changed in me when I saw that look. I knew how it was for her, how it was going to be.

"There's no reason to kill those birds," I said. "Just cut the shit out."

"You don't do that," she said. "You don't do that." She turned her face away and looked out at the bay. Her eyes could have blasted the whole flock. I felt terrible, and relieved. I had broken the back of my little romance. Then, I nearly reeled away, as the shadow I had called up on the river seemed to move toward me out of the corner of my eye. I touched Alene's rigid shoulder. She snapped my hand away.

"Don't touch me, shit," she said.

"Alene . . . damn, don't."

"You all don't hurt yourselves," Harold said quietly. "Let's go up and get lunch."

He started up the road. We stayed where we were. He stopped.

"Alene," he said, "come on. Aren't you hungry?"

She turned, without looking at me, and followed him, without speaking. I let them get ahead then followed, too, feeling that I had torn another chance loose and lost it, feeling my penis rise as I watched her ass move in her jeans—not shadows—and I walked along that way, behind them, Harold's hand resting casually on Alene's shoulder, me trailing, touching myself through cloth as I walked.

The house was screened-in across the front and around one side. A galvanized pipe ran off the roof into a wooden water tank. Lank, freeze-burned azaleas grew in the dirt yard. Harold held the porch door open for Alene and waited on the top step for me. I came up adjusting my crotch. He looked at me and smiled but said nothing.

The porch was bare except for a twine seine net folded in a pile next to the front door and a swing hung by chains from a rafter at one end. Alene bent to look through curtained front windows.

"Who is this?" she asked. "It looks like a funeral parlor."

I knocked on the front door. I heard footsteps and the old woman pulled the curtain back and looked out through the glass panel. She opened the door.

"Come on in the house," she said. She turned her back and was already heading down a dark, carpeted hallway when we got through the door. "Come on to the kitchen," she said. I caught up with her as she banged through a screen door onto another porch that ran along the back ell of the house.

"I just leave that front," she said. "I can't afford to heat it and I don't even turn on the lights." In the backyard a few chickens scratched at dirt. A barbed-wire fence separated the yard from an open lot that was backed by a fallen-in barn and shed. A gourd martin house hung from the top of a pole between the barn and the shed.

"We can eat in the kitchen," she said. Her sneakers

squeaked on the bare boards.

She led us into a high-ceilinged kitchen that was bright with light. Geraniums flowered in cans in the windows. We sat down at a table that was covered with a flowered plastic cloth. She crossed the room to a pot steaming on the stove.

"You mind helping me, honey?" she said to Alene as she lifted the pot off the stove.

"No, thank you," Alene said.

"I'll get it," Harold said quickly and took the pot. "Where do you want it?"

"Just put it right over here on the table—wait a minute." She folded a towel and placed it under the pot. I rose.

"I'll get the bowls," I said. Alene stared at the door.

"They're in the cabinet," the old woman said.

I picked four bowls and saucers out of mixed crockery and set them on the table. The woman lay spoons on the cloth.

"Y'all want bread?" she said.

"You betcha," Harold said.

She took a half loaf from the refrigerator. "Milk?"

"Fine," I said. She set the bread and a quart of milk on the table. "There." She sat down and tucked her head in a quick, wordless grace. She looked up. "Y'all eat," she said.

The soup was vegetable. I blew into a spoonful and tasted it. It was just what I needed. Whole tomatoes flaccid as the hornet's nest. Oh, oh. I took another spoonful, closed my eyes and ate.

"I'm Miss Alma Brannen," the old woman said. "I'm glad to have you here."

"I'm Jack Dupree," I said. "This is Harold Johnson."

Alene said nothing. She leaned close to her bowl spooning in soup.

"Who are you, darling?" Miss Brannen asked.

"I'm the one that got shamelessly hauled down here," she said.

"You did? Why is that?"

"Kidnapped," Alene said.

"This is Alene," Harold said. "This cold's got us tired out." Alene gave him a hard look. She took a slice of bread, ripped

it in half and dunked it in her soup.

"I'm not too tired," she said.

"Lord, I am," Harold said. "I felt the cold all night long."

"If you hadn't got scared and run," Alene laughed. "Crackers," she said.

"Well, I'm an old cracker woman myself," Miss Brannen said. "Florida cracker. I been down here crackering on this bay all my life."

"I don't see how you stand it," Alene said. "I know I couldn't."

"Be thankful you don't have to, then," Miss Brannen said and laughed through perfect false teeth.

"Don't you worry," Alene said.

I felt like slugging the little maniac. Christ, Alene. The cuffs of her parka were dirty, but the wrist that slipped out as she raised the spoon was clean and white. She held her hair out of her soup and didn't look at anybody. And I wanted to touch her. I wanted to sit on sunny back steps with the scent of her hair in my nostrils as she leaned against me and think about my dream. How peaceful I had felt walking on that road. But, though the trees I could see through the window opposite were green—cabbage palms and pines—it was winter and the sky above branches was that high whooping white, whiter than pearl, that appears in winter only and what would the dream mean to Alene, and to Frieda flossing in sheets next door? I picked a butter bean off the side of my bowl. This was enough—I was thankful, thankful enough to be in this warm kitchen eating soup. And maybe I didn't need to press my face into Alene's gray-stained hair at all. Wrenching the gun away from her had done me good. The little explosion of action had popped me out of myself. Frieda's grip—someone's—had for a moment weakened.

I looked at Alene as she thrust her fierce face toward her bowl. For a second I saw the thing in her face, her look—brows bunched—the thing that was as different from me and what I knew as I was different from geese cruising in the bay: it was a lie, this easy kitchen relaxation, this warm soup—there was no dream, there was no shadow, there was simply

this woman here, simply fine dark hairs on a clean wrist, simply her, now, I wanted, and I reached across the table and with one finger touched a wisp of hair in front of her ear.

"Whatever you do is all right," I said. "I'm sorry about before—I don't expect anything of you."

She flicked my hand away. "I don't worry about that," she said.

Miss Brannen rose. "Let me get you some more soup," she said.

"I wouldn't mind a bit," Harold said getting up, too.

"I'm fine," I said.

Instead of answering Alene got up, placed her spoon next to her bowl and walked out onto the porch. I watched her wash her hands in the sink, dry them on a towel then stand looking into the yard. She raised her arms and pressed her open palms against the screen. It was a gesture a man might make, and the way she cocked her knee forward, keeping her weight on the other leg was a man's attitude, too. I had never seen a woman do that.

At the stove Miss Brannen filled the bowl Harold held.

"I don't usually make this much soup—or make soup at all—" she said, "but I've been collecting leftovers for a week and this morning I decided to go ahead."

"It's delicious," Harold said. "Just a little more."

"Wouldn't you like some more—Jack," she asked me.

"No, thank you. What day is today?"

"Sunday," she said.

I couldn't keep my eyes off Alene. She stood stiffly, looking out, her palms flat against the screen. As I watched she thrust her hair back smoothly with one hand and turned. Her face was calm though her eyes didn't seem to be seeing us.

"A car just drove into the yard," she said and turned back to the screen.

"It's probably Jimmy Peters," Miss Brannen said crossing to the door.

"Who is that?" Harold asked.

"The ranger." She paused with her hand on the latch.

"He'll probably tell you not to camp here," she said. "They're

right touchy about it; and Jimmy is one of the touchiest." She went out.

"Oh, fuck," Harold said looking at me. "The bastard is looking for us."

He jumped up and ran to the back window and came back to the table. "We'd better get out of here," he said.

"You think so?" My heart pounded, but not for fear of capture only.

"Come on," he said, going out the door.

For a moment I couldn't move. My shoulders were heavy as cement though a sharp pain had shot suddenly through them. Four bowls on plastic cloth, three empty, one full; four spoons. Geraniums in the window. Sweet potato roots crawling in a jar. All right. All right. I pushed myself up with both hands. Another slice of bread for the energy that was in it. Thank you, Miss B., but we've got to run.

Harold ran down the back steps ahead of Alene. I followed with the slice of white bread in my mouth.

"We can cut through the woods," Harold said.

We ducked under the fence and ran through the lot scattering chickens. Behind us in the house someone yelled, but no matter, we dashed between barn and shed (my hand slapping the martin house pole for luck), into woods.

The ground was covered with leaves and pine straw. The woods, dark and gummy in summer, rattlesnake and chigger woods, were stiff and odorless. A branch lashed my face. I caught up with Alene and ran beside her. Ahead, Harold fought as he ran, forcing branches back, but Alene ran as if she were the leader of an easy race: upright, head back, hardly bothering with snaps of undergrowth.

We broke out into the march and ran through the tough, waist-high grass toward the canoe. Fiddler crabs slipped into holes, quick as roaches. The geese still floated in the bay. Such a high reach of sky I wanted suddenly to tear through. Alene! Alene! I touched her parka, my fingers slid down its nylon skin, but we could not stop for caresses. There ahead the canoe, left dry by tide; it sat, flat as a shoe, in sand.

We reached the beach as the ranger was getting out of his

government pickup.

"Hey," he said, "wait a minute," and crossed the grass, holding his gun in its holster.

We walked to the canoe and stopped beside it. Harold touched the bow, brushed off nothing and straightened up.

The ranger came up to us. He was tall and wore a cap.

"I want to speak to you," he said.

"Okay," Harold said, "I got a minute."

"I don't," Alene said, "I'm going."

"Be quiet, Alene," Harold said. It was the first time he had spoken harshly to her. He reached for her but she pulled her arm away.

"No, thank you," she said.

"Come up here to the truck," the ranger said. He un-snapped his gun and ran his hand along the butt. The pain in my shoulders had moved into my chest. Wait, wait just a minute—we're all right.

"I'm not going with *you*," Alene said to the ranger. He started to speak as she whirled on us. "And I'm not going with *you*," she said. She began to drag the canoe by the stern into the water.

"You wait right there," the ranger said. He took a step forward.

"No," Alene said. She waded into the water pulling the canoe. We didn't move.

"I can't let you go," the ranger said and grabbed the canoe by the bow.

"You can't do anything about it, squirt," Alene said. She got in the canoe. It rocked, barely afloat, in the shallow water.

"Stop it right there," the ranger cried.

"Shit." She laughed and reached for the gun that lay across the boxes in front of her. The ranger reached for his gun, too, but he wasn't as fast as Alene. From the waist she had the .410 leveled at him before his pistol was halfway out of the holster. "You dummy," she said.

The ranger's face went white. For a second I thought she was going to shoot him. But she didn't. She didn't back

down on it though, she just had other plans.

She made him ease his gun out and throw it into the bay. Then, with a cargo rope, she made Harold tie the ranger up. She didn't bother with us.

"What now?" Harold said, trying to joke. He was smiling hard.

"I don't care what happens to you," she said, crossed the grass and got in the truck.

"Easy come, easy go," Harold said.

I touched my face; there were tears. I had an impulse to follow her, to go where she was going, to see one more time how she banged past whatever was trying to stop her, to learn whatever lesson I hadn't learned from Frieda, but I stayed where I was.

She leaned out of the window. "You'll just have to learn to live with it, sport," she said, I guess to me. Then she wrenched the truck into gear and gunned it out of there.

Nobody ever saw her again, nobody I ever heard about. They found the truck two days later on a street in Mobile. Alene was wanted before she pulled the gun on the ranger and we had a lot of talking to do, but in the end, after a non-jury trial in Tallahassee, we got off with a couple years probation.

She said I'd have to learn to live with it, whatever it was. That is what I am doing.

Two Poems by Timothy Steele

Timothy

Although the field lay cut in swaths,
Grass at the edge survived the crop:
Stiff stems with lateral blades of leaf,
Dense cattail flower-spikes at the top.

If there was breeze and open sky,
We raked each swath into a row;
If not, we took the hay to dry
To the barn's golden-showering mow.

The hay forked from our pick-up truck
Was thatched resilience where it fell,
And I took pleasure in the thought
The fresh hay's name was mine as well.

Work was a soothing, rhythmic ache;
Hay stuck where skin or clothes were damp.
At length, the truck would rock and shake
Its last stack up the barn's wood ramp.

Pumping a handpump's iron arm,
I washed myself as best I could,
Then watched the acres of the farm
Draw lengthening shadows from the wood

Across the grass, which seemed a thing
In which the lonely and concealed
Had risen from its sorrowing
And fruitfully possessed the field.

From a Rooftop

At dawn, down in the streets, from pavement grills,
Steam rises like the spent breath of the night.
At open windows, curtains stir on sills;
There's caging drawn across a market's face;
An empty crane, at its construction site,
Suspends a cable into chasmed space.

The roof shows other rooftops, their plateaus
Marked with antennas from which lines are tied
And strung with water beads or hung with clothes.
And here and there a pigeon comes to peck
At opaque puddles, its stiff walk supplied
By herky-jerky motions of its neck.

Downtown, tall buildings surmount a thinning haze.
The newest, the world center of a bank,
Has sides swept upward from a block-broad base,
Obsidian glass, fifty stories tall;
And from its summit hang ropes and a plank,
A window-washer's dazzling port of call.

Nearer and eastward, past still-sleeping blocks,
Crews on the waterfront are changing shifts.
Trucks load at warehouses at the foot of docks;
A tug out in the bay, gathering speed,
With a short hollow blast of puffed smoke, lifts
Seabirds to cawing and air-borne stampede.

It is as if dawn pliantly compels
The city to relax to sounds and shapes,
To its diagonals and parallels:
Long streets with traffic signals blinking red,
Small squares of parks, alleys with fire escapes,
Rooftops above which cloudless day is spread.

And it's as if the roofs' wind-freshened shelves,
Their level surfaces of gravelled tar
Where glassy fragments glitter, are themselves
A measure of the intermediate worth
Of all the stories to the morning star
And all the stories to the morning earth.

Two Poems by Molly Peacock

The Distance Up Close

All my life I've had goals to go after, goals
in a molten distance. And just the way snows
in the distance, dense and white among groves
of bare trees, lessen as I approach and show
not white, but a mix of mud and leaves among rows
of breathing trees, the fantasies that rose
from my young mind, guarded against my foes'
mocking by my own mocking, lessen. I know
what I've approached, and I am very frightened. It shows
in my slipping face in the melting present. Goals
far off are fire and ice, like a walk through snow
toward a blood-orange sunset. But there is no
perfection like that in coming up close, no
purity in intimacy. Embracing the world, nose
to brow with what we've got and lost, hugging old sorrows
as they fade into mud and leaves, is like shedding clothes,
is like lovers saying, *lets-take-off-our-clothes*.
The word is made flesh in their bodies: does is knows.
The world is made flesh by the snows
fading, then merging into mud and leaves, goals
of long ago emerging among trees in rows
in a distance molten as the world comes up close.

Mental France

We adults make love, but I am far away
in a hut at dusk where two lovers lay
swathed in orange light. Near night. A table
across the room, a purple swath of cloth
on the floor (a girl's dress), on the table
two green oranges . . . blur in my thought. Both
of us almost stop moving in the hiatus
that comes while we wait for each other to focus.

What I used to read is real.
The hut was in a book I read for hours
in school, praying to feel what other people feel.
Now that my desires suit my powers
I find a splendid past in this present, cut
from the literature of love like a fresh
wish clipped from a standard prayer: my hut
in France in this apartment of flesh.

THE OLD PICTURE

~~Minnesota~~ An old station wagon with Minnesota plates pulls up in front of our apartment. There's a man and woman in the front seat, and two boys in the back. The windows are down. It's July, temperature's one hundred, the people look whipped out. There's hanging clothes in the car, and boxes and such. You see the picture. From what Harley and me put together later, the stuff in the car is about all these people had to show after the bank took their house, their pickup truck, the tractor, all the implements, and the livestock and horses. They got out of Minnesota with the station wagon and a few personal items. They wind up here in Tucson Arizona in the middle of a July afternoon, temperature 100. The saying life is something strange, I have imagination. I can imagine a girl in a bank 2000 miles away typing up a letter. Somebody else reads the letter and passes it along to somebody else for a signature. That somebody writes his signature and passes it back to that other somebody who puts the letter in an envelope. Somebody else, a mailman, delivers same. Things are set in motion so that this afternoon, some later, this loaded station wagon pulls up. The people, well sit there for a minute. After some discussions in the front seat, this couple gets out and comes to the door. I'm watching from the window. I open the door and say, "Welcome to Fulton Terrace. Come in where it's cool." I show them into the living room, which is where I do my apartment house business-taking rents and writing receipts, talking to people who are interested in

I'm looking out the window at this old station wagon with Minnesota license plates, parked in front of the apartment house. There's a man and woman in the front seat, and two boys in the back. It's July, temp's one hundred degrees plus. The people inside the station wagon look whipped out. And who could blame them? There's clothes hanging in the car, suitcases, boxes and such piled in the back. From what my husband Harley and I put together later, the stuff inside the station wagon was all these people had left after the bank in Minnesota took the house, pickup truck, tractor, farm implements, and their few livestock.

The people inside the station wagon sit for a minute as if to collect themselves. The air conditioner's going. Harley is mowing the grass. There's some discussion in the front seat, and then this couple gets out and comes up to the door. I wait until they ring the bell for the second time. I pat my hair to make sure that's in place. Then I go to the door, open it, and "Welcome. You're looking for an apartment? I also do hair. I'm a stylist. If somebody asks, I say "stylist." I like that word better than

APARTMENTS

The Point

BOATS

The old station wagon with Minnesota plates pulls up in front of our apartment house. There's a man and woman in the front seat, two boys in the back. It's July, temperature's one hundred degrees plus. The people inside the station wagon look whipped out. And who could blame them? There's hanging clothes in the car, suitcases, boxes and such piled in the back. From what Harley and me put together later, what was inside the station wagon was all these people had left after the bank in Minnesota took the house, pickup truck, tractor, farm implements, and the livestock and horses. They got out of Minnesota with their station wagon and these few personal belongings, and went to

This old station wagon with Minnesota license plates pulls into a parking space in front of our window. There's a man and woman in the front seat, and two boys in the back. It's July, temp's one hundred degrees plus. The people inside the station wagon look whipped out. And who could blame them? There's clothes hanging inside, suitcases, boxes and such piled in the back. From what my husband, Harley, and I put together later, what was inside the station wagon was all these people had left after the bank in Minnesota took the house, pickup truck, tractor, farm implements, and the few livestock.

The people inside the station wagon sit for a minute as if collecting themselves. The air conditioner in our apartment is running full-blast. Harley's around in back of the units mowing the grass. There's some discussion in the front seat, and then the couple get out and start for the front door. I pat my hair to make sure that's in place and wait till they push the doorbell for the second time. Then I go open the door.

"You're looking for an apartment? Come on in here where it's cool." I show them into the living room. The place where I do my business. It's where I collect rents, write out the receipts, and talk to parties interested. I also do hair. If somebody asks, I say "hair stylist." I like that

Life is one thing after another. Sitting along one day, and then the next day something like this. Everything happens in the world. The station wagon pulls up outside. The people inside sit for a minute as if to collect themselves. The air conditioner in the front seat, Harley's outside mowing the grass. There's some discussion in the front seat, and then this couple gets out and comes to the door. I open up and say, "Welcome. Come in where it's cool." I show them into the living room, which is

Four drafts of the opening page of Raymond Carver's "The Bridle."



Tess Gallagher

The Art of Fiction LXXVI

Raymond Carver

Raymond Carver lives in a large, two-story, wood-shingled house on a quiet street in Syracuse. The front lawn slopes down to the sidewalk. A new Mercedes sits in the driveway. An older VW, the other household car, gets parked on the street.

The entrance to the house is through a large, screened-in porch. Inside, the furnishings are almost without character. Everything matches—cream colored couches, a glass coffee table. Tess Gallagher, the writer Raymond Carver lives with, collects peacock feathers and sets them in vases throughout the house—the only noticeable decorative attempt. My suspicions were confirmed; Raymond Carver told me that all the furniture

was purchased and delivered in one day.

Tess has painted a detachable wooden "No Visitors" sign, the lettering surrounded by yellow and orange eyelashes, which hangs on the screen door. Sometimes the phone is unplugged and the sign stays up for days at a time.

Carver works in a large room on the top floor. The surface of the long oak desk is clear; his typewriter is set to the side, on an L-shaped wing. There are no knickknacks, charms or toys of any kind on Carver's desk. He is not a collector, or a man prone to nostalgia and mementos. Occasionally, one manilla folder lies on the oak desk, containing the story currently in the process of being revised. His files are well in order. He can extract a story and all its previous versions at a moment's notice. The walls of the study are painted white, like the rest of the house, and also, like the rest of the house, they are mostly bare. Through a high rectangular window above Carver's desk, light filters into the room in slanted beams, like light from high church windows.

Carver is a large man who wears simple clothes—flannel shirts, khaki slacks or jeans. For someone of his size, he has a remarkably low and indistinct voice. I found myself bending closer every few minutes to catch his words and asking the irritating "What, what?"

The "No Visitors" sign was not up and several Syracuse students dropped by to visit during the course of the interview, including Carver's son, who is a senior. For lunch, Carver made us sandwiches with salmon he had caught off the coast of Washington. Both he and Tess are from Washington state and they are in the process of building a house in Port Angeles, where they intend to live part of the year. I asked Carver if that house would feel more like a home to him. He replied, "No, wherever I am is fine. This is fine."

INTERVIEWER

What was your early life like, and what made you want to write?

CARVER

I grew up in a small town in eastern Washington, a place called Yakima. My dad worked at the sawmill there. He was a saw-filer and helped take care of the saws that were used to cut and plane the logs. My mother worked as a retail clerk or a waitress or else stayed at home, but she didn't keep any job for very long. I remember talk concerning her "nerves." In the cabinet under the kitchen sink, she kept a bottle of patent "nerve medicine," and she'd take a couple of tablespoons of this every morning. My dad's nerve medicine was whiskey. Most often he kept a bottle of it under that same sink, or else outside in the woodshed. I remember sneaking a taste of it once and hating it, and wondering how anybody could drink the stuff. Home was a little two-bedroom house. We moved a lot when I was a kid, but it was always into another little two-bedroom house. The first house I can remember living in, near the fairgrounds in Yakima, had an outdoor toilet. This was in the late 1940s. I was eight or ten years old then. I used to wait at the bus stop for my dad to come home from work. Usually he was as regular as clockwork. But every two weeks or so, he wouldn't be on the bus. I'd stick around then and wait for the next bus, but I already knew he wasn't going to be on that one, either. When this happened, it meant he'd gone drinking with friends of his from the sawmill. I still remember the sense of doom and hopelessness that hung over the supper table when my mother and I and my kid brother sat down to eat.

INTERVIEWER

But what made you want to write?

CARVER

The only explanation I can give you is that my dad told me lots of stories about himself when he was a kid, and about his dad and his grandfather. His grandfather had fought in the Civil War. He fought for both sides! He was a turncoat. When the South began losing the war, he crossed over to the North and began fighting for the Union forces. My dad

laughed when he told this story. He didn't see anything wrong with it, and I guess I didn't either. Anyway, my dad would tell me stories, anecdotes really, no moral to them, about tramping around in the woods, or else riding the rails and having to look out for railroad bulls. I loved his company and loved to listen to him tell me these stories. Once in a while he'd read something to me from what he was reading. Zane Grey westerns. These were the first real hardback books, outside of grade-school texts, and the Bible, that I'd ever seen. It wouldn't happen very often, but now and again I'd see him lying on the bed of an evening and reading from Zane Grey. It seemed a very private act in a house and family that were not given to privacy. I realized that he had this private side to him, something I didn't understand or know anything about, but something that found expression through this occasional reading. I was interested in that side of him and interested in the act itself. I'd ask him to read me what he was reading, and he'd oblige by just reading from wherever he happened to be in the book. After a while he'd say, "Junior, go do something else now." Well, there were plenty of things to do. In those days, I went fishing in this creek that was not too far from our house. A little later, I started hunting ducks and geese and upland game. That's what excited me in those days, hunting and fishing. That's what made a dent in my emotional life, and that's what I wanted to write about.

My reading fare in those days, aside from an occasional historical novel or Mickey Spillane mystery, consisted of *Sports Afield* and *Outdoor Life*, and *Field and Stream*. I wrote a longish thing about the fish that got away, or the fish I caught, one or the other, and asked my mother if she would type it up for me. She couldn't type, but she did go rent a typewriter, bless her heart, and between the two of us, we typed it up in some terrible fashion and sent it out. I remember there were two addresses on the masthead of the outdoors magazine; so we sent it to the office closest to us, to Boulder, Colorado, the circulation department. The piece came back, finally, but that was fine. It had gone out in the world, that

manuscript—it had been places. Somebody had read it besides my mother, or so I hoped anyway. Then I saw an ad in *Writer's Digest*. It was a photograph of a man, a successful author, obviously, testifying to something called the Palmer Institute of Authorship. That seemed like just the thing for me. There was a monthly payment plan involved. Twenty dollars down, ten or fifteen dollars a month for three years or thirty years, one of those things. There were weekly assignments with personal responses to the assignments. I stayed with it for a few months. Then, maybe I got bored; I stopped doing the work. My folks stopped making the payments. Pretty soon a letter arrived from the Palmer Institute telling me that if I paid them up in full, I could still get the certificate of completion. This seemed more than fair. Somehow I talked my folks into paying the rest of the money, and in due time I got the certificate and hung it up on my bedroom wall. But all through high school it was assumed that I'd graduate and go to work at the sawmill. For a long time I wanted to do the kind of work my dad did. He was going to ask his foreman at the mill to put me on after I graduated. So I worked at the mill for about six months. But I hated the work and knew from the first day I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life. I worked long enough to save the money for a car, buy some clothes, and so I could move out and get married.

INTERVIEWER

Somehow, for whatever reasons, you went to college. Was it your wife who wanted you to go on to college? Did she encourage you in this respect? Did she want to go to college and that made you want to go? How old were you at this point? She must have been pretty young, too.

CARVER

I was eighteen. She was sixteen and pregnant and had just graduated from an Episcopalian private school for girls in Walla Walla, Washington. At school she'd learned the right way to hold a teacup; she'd had religious instruction and gym and such, but she also learned about physics and literature

and foreign languages. I was terrifically impressed that she knew Latin. Latin! She tried off and on to go to college during those first years, but it was too hard to do that; it was impossible to do that and raise a family and be broke all the time, too. I mean broke. Her family didn't have any money. She was going to that school on a scholarship. Her mother hated me and still does. My wife was supposed to graduate and go on to the University of Washington to study law on a fellowship. Instead, I made her pregnant, and we got married and began our life together. She was seventeen when the first child was born, eighteen when the second was born. What shall I say at this point? We didn't have any youth. We found ourselves in roles we didn't know how to play. But we did the best we could. Better than that I want to think. She did finish college finally. She got her B.A. degree at San Jose State twelve or fourteen years after we married.

INTERVIEWER

Were you writing during these early, difficult years?

CARVER

I worked nights and went to school days. We were always working. She was working and trying to raise the kids and manage a household. She worked for the telephone company. The kids were with a babysitter during the day. Finally, I graduated with the B.A. degree from Chico State College and we put everything into the car and in one of those carryalls that fits on top of your car, and we went to Iowa City. A teacher named Dick Day at Humboldt State had told me about the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Day had sent along a story of mine and three or four poems to Don Justice who was responsible for getting me a five hundred dollar grant at Iowa.

INTERVIEWER

Five hundred dollars?

CARVER

That's all they had, they said. It seemed like a lot at the

time. But I didn't finish at Iowa. They offered me more money to stay on the second year, but we just couldn't do it. I was working in the library for a dollar or two an hour, and my wife was working as a waitress. It was going to take me another year to get a degree, and we just couldn't stick it out. So we moved back to California. This time it was Sacramento. I found work as a night janitor at Mercy Hospital. I kept the job for three years. It was a pretty good job. I only had to work two or three hours a night, but I was paid for eight hours. There was a certain amount of work that had to get done, but once it was done, that was it—I could go home or do anything I wanted. The first year or two I went home every night and would be in bed at a reasonable hour and be able to get up in the morning and write. The kids would be off at the babysitter's and my wife would have gone to her job—a door-to-door sales job. I'd have all day in front of me. This was fine for a while. Then I began getting off work at night and going drinking instead of going home. By this time it was 1967 or 1968.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first get published?

CARVER

When I was an undergraduate at Humboldt State in Arcata, California. One day, I had a short story taken at one magazine and a poem taken at another. It was a terrific day! Maybe one of the best days ever. My wife and I drove around town and showed the letters of acceptance to all of our friends. It gave some much-needed validation to our lives.

INTERVIEWER

What was the first story you ever published? And the first poem?

CARVER

It was a story called "Pastoral" and it was published in the *Western Humanities Review*. It's a good literary magazine

and it's still being published by the University of Utah. They didn't pay me anything for the story, but that didn't matter. The poem was called "The Brass Ring," and it was published by a magazine in Arizona, now defunct, called *Targets*. Charles Bukowski had a poem in the same issue, and I was pleased to be in the same magazine with him. He was a kind of hero to me then.

INTERVIEWER

Is it true—a friend of yours told me this—that you celebrated your first publication by taking the magazine to bed with you?

CARVER

That's partly true. Actually, it was a book, *The Best American Short Stories* annual. My story "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" had just appeared in the collection. That was back in the late sixties when it was edited every year by Martha Foley and people used to call it that—simply, "The Foley Collection." The story had been published in an obscure little magazine out of Chicago called *December*. The day the anthology came in the mail I took it to bed to read and just to look at, you know, and hold it, but I did more looking and holding than actual reading. I fell asleep and woke up the next morning with the book there in bed beside me, along with my wife.

INTERVIEWER

In an article you did for the *New York Times Book Review* you mentioned a story "too tedious to talk about here"—about why you choose to write short stories over novels. Do you want to go into that story now?

CARVER

The story that was "too tedious to talk about" has to do with a number of things that aren't very pleasant to talk about. I did finally talk about some of these things in the essay "Fires," which was published in *Antaeus*. In it I said that finally, a writer is judged by what he writes, and that's

the way it should be. The circumstances surrounding the writing are something else, something extra-literary. Nobody ever asked me to be a writer. But it *was* tough to stay alive and pay bills and put food on the table and at the same time to think of myself as a writer and to *learn* to write. After years of working crap jobs and raising kids and trying to write, I realized I needed to write things I could finish and be done with in a hurry. There was no way I could undertake a novel, a two or three year stretch of work on a single project. I needed to write something I could get some kind of a payoff from immediately, not next year, or three years from now. Hence, poems and stories. I was beginning to see that my life was not—let's say it was not what I wanted it to be. There was always a wagonload of frustration to deal with—wanting to write and not being able to find the time or the place for it. I used to go out and sit in the car and try to write something on a pad on my knee. This was when the kids were in their adolescence. I was in my late twenties or early thirties. We were still in a state of penury, we had one bankruptcy behind us, and years of hard work with nothing to show for it except an old car, a rented house and new creditors on our backs. It was depressing, and I felt spiritually obliterated. Alcohol became a problem. I more or less gave up, threw in the towel, and took to full-time drinking as a serious pursuit. That's part of what I was talking about when I was talking about things "too tedious to talk about."

INTERVIEWER

Could you talk a little more about the drinking? So many writers, even if they're not alcoholics, drink so much.

CARVER

Probably not a whole lot more than any other group of professionals. You'd be surprised. Of course there's a mythology that goes along with the drinking, but I was never into that. I was into the drinking itself. I suppose I began to drink heavily after I'd realized that the things I'd wanted most in life for myself and my writing, and my wife and chil-

dren, were simply not going to happen. It's strange. You never start out in life with the intention of becoming a bankrupt or an alcoholic or a cheat and a thief. Or a liar.

INTERVIEWER

And you were all those things?

CARVER

I was. I'm not any longer. Oh, I lie a little from time to time, like everyone else.

INTERVIEWER

How long since you quit drinking?

CARVER

June second, 1977. If you want the truth, I'm prouder of that, that I've quit drinking, than I am of anything in my life. I'm a recovered alcoholic. I'll always be an alcoholic, but I'm no longer a practicing alcoholic.

INTERVIEWER

How bad did the drinking get?

CARVER

It's very painful to think about some of the things that happened back then. I made a wasteland out of everything I touched. But I might add that towards the end of the drinking there wasn't much left anyway. But specific things? Let's just say, on occasion, the police were involved and emergency rooms and courtrooms.

INTERVIEWER

How did you stop? What made you able to stop?

CARVER

The last year of my drinking, 1977, I was in a recovery center twice, as well as one hospital; and I spent a few days in a place called DeWitt near San Jose, California. DeWitt used

to be, appropriately enough, a hospital for the criminally insane. Toward the end of my drinking career I was completely out of control and in a very grave place. Blackouts, the whole business—points where you can't remember anything you say or do during a certain period of time. You might drive a car, give a reading, teach a class, set a broken leg, go to bed with someone, and not have any memory of it later. You're on some kind of automatic pilot. I have an image of myself sitting in my living room with a glass of whiskey in my hand and my head bandaged from a fall caused by an alcoholic seizure. Crazy! Two weeks later I was back in a recovery center, this time at a place called Duffy's, in Calistoga, California, up in the wine country. I was at Duffy's on two different occasions, in the place called DeWitt, in San Jose; and in a hospital in San Francisco—all in the space of twelve months. I guess that's pretty bad. I was dying from it, plain and simple, and I'm not exaggerating.

INTERVIEWER

What brought you to the point where you could stop drinking for good?

CARVER

It was late May 1977. I was living by myself in a house in a little town in northern California, and I'd been sober for about three weeks. I drove to San Francisco where they were having this publishers' convention. Fred Hills, at that time editor-in-chief at McGraw-Hill, wanted to take me to lunch and offer me money to write a novel. But a couple of nights before the lunch, one of my friends had a party. Midway through, I picked up a glass of wine and drank it, and that's the last thing I remember. Blackout time. The next morning when the stores opened, I was waiting to buy a bottle. The dinner that night was a disaster; it was terrible, people quarreling and disappearing from the table. And the next morning I had to get up and go have this lunch with Fred Hills. I was so hung over when I woke up I could hardly hold my head up. But I drank a half pint of vodka before I picked up

Hills and that helped, for the short run. And then he wanted to drive over to Sausalito for lunch! That took us at least an hour in heavy traffic, and I was drunk and hung over both, you understand. But for some reason he went ahead and offered me this money to write a novel.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever write the novel?

CARVER

Not yet! Anyway, I managed to get out of San Francisco back up to where I lived. I stayed drunk for a couple more days. And then I woke up, feeling terrible, but I didn't drink anything that morning. Nothing alcoholic, I mean. I felt terrible physically — mentally, too, of course — but I didn't drink anything. I didn't drink for three days, and when the third day had passed, I began to feel some better. Then I just kept not drinking. Gradually I began to put a little distance between myself and the booze. A week. Two weeks. Suddenly it was a month. I'd been sober for a month, and I was slowly starting to get well.

INTERVIEWER

Did AA help?

CARVER

It helped a lot. I went to at least one and sometimes two meetings a day for the first month.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever feel that alcohol was in any way an inspiration? I'm thinking of your poem "Vodka," published in *Esquire*.

CARVER

My God, no! I hope I've made that clear. Cheever remarked that he could always recognize "an alcoholic line" in a writer's work. I'm not exactly sure what he meant by this but I think I know. When we were teaching in the Iowa

Writers' Workshop in the fall semester of 1973, he and I did nothing *but* drink. I mean we met our classes, in a manner of speaking. But the entire time we were there—we were living in this hotel they have on campus, the Iowa House—I don't think either of us ever took the covers off our typewriters. We made trips to a liquor store twice a week in my car.

INTERVIEWER

To stock up?

CARVER

Yes, stock up. But the store didn't open until ten A.M. Once we planned an early morning run, a ten o'clock run and we were going to meet in the lobby of the hotel. I came down early to get some cigarettes and John was pacing up and down in the lobby. He was wearing loafers, but he didn't have any socks on. Anyway, we headed out a little early. By the time we got to the liquor store the clerk was just unlocking the front door. On this particular morning, John got out of the car before I could get it properly parked. By the time I got inside the store he was already at the checkout stand with a half gallon of Scotch. He lived on the fourth floor of the hotel and I lived on the second. Our rooms were identical, right down to the same reproduction of the same painting hanging on the wall. But when we drank together, we always drank in his room. He said he was afraid to come down to drink on the second floor. He said there was always a chance of him getting mugged in the hallway! But you know, of course, that fortunately, not too long after Cheever left Iowa City, he went to a treatment center and got sober and stayed sober until he died.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel the spoken confessions at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings have influenced your writing?

CARVER

There are different kinds of meetings—speaker meetings

where just one speaker will get up and talk for fifty minutes or so about what it was like then, and maybe what it's like now. And there are meetings where everyone in the room has a chance to say something. But I can't honestly say I've ever consciously or otherwise patterned any of my stories on things I've heard at the meetings.

INTERVIEWER

Where do your stories come from, then? I'm especially asking about the stories that have something to do with drinking.

CARVER

The fiction I'm most interested in has lines of reference to the real world. None of my stories really *happened*, of course. But there's always something, some element, something said to me or that I witnessed, that may be the starting place. Here's an example: "That's the last Christmas you'll ever ruin for us!" I was drunk when I heard that, but I remembered it. And later, much later, when I was sober, using only that one line and other things I imagined, imagined so accurately that they *could* have happened, I made a story—"A Serious Talk."

But the fiction I'm most interested in, whether it's Tolstoy's fiction, Chekhov, Barry Hannah, Richard Ford, Hemingway, Isaac Babel, Ann Beattie or Anne Tyler, strikes me as autobiographical to some extent. At the very least it's referential. Stories long or short don't just come out of thin air. I'm reminded of a conversation involving John Cheever. We were sitting around a table in Iowa City with some people and he happened to remark that after a family fracas at his home one night, he got up the next morning and went into the bathroom to find something his daughter had written in lipstick on the bathroom mirror: "D-e-r-e daddy, don't leave us." Someone at the table spoke up and said, "I recognize that from one of your stories." Cheever said, "Probably so. Everything I write is autobiographical." Now of course that's not literally true. But everything we write is, in some way, autobiographical. I'm not in the least bothered by "autobiog-

raphical" fiction. To the contrary. *On The Road*. Céline. Roth. Lawrence Durrell in *The Alexandria Quartet*. So much of Hemingway in the Nick Adams stories. Updike, too, you bet. Jim McConkey. Clark Blaise is a contemporary writer whose fiction is out-and-out autobiography. Of course, you have to know what you're doing when you turn your life's stories into fiction. You have to be immensely daring, very skilled and imaginative and willing to tell everything on yourself. You're told time and again when you're young to write about what you know, and what do you know better than your own secrets? But unless you're a special kind of writer, and a very talented one, it's dangerous to try and write volume after volume on the Story of My Life. A great danger, or at least a great temptation, for many writers is to become too autobiographical in their approach to their fiction. A little autobiography and a lot of imagination are best.

INTERVIEWER

Are your characters trying to do what matters?

CARVER

I think they are trying. But trying and succeeding are two different matters. In some lives, people always succeed; and I think it's grand when that happens. In other lives, people don't succeed at what they try to do, at the things they want most to do, the large or small things that support the life. These lives are, of course, valid to write about, the lives of the people who don't succeed. Most of my own experience, direct or indirect, has to do with the latter situation. I think most of my characters would like their actions to count for something. But at the same time they've reached the point—as so many people do—that they know it isn't so. It doesn't add up any longer. The things you once thought important or even worth dying for aren't worth a nickel now. It's their lives they've become uncomfortable with, lives they see breaking down. They'd like to set things right, but they can't. And usually they do know it, I think, and after that they just do the best they can.

INTERVIEWER

Could you say something about one of my favorite stories in your most recent collection? Where did the idea for "Why Don't You Dance?" originate?

CARVER

I was visiting some writer friends in Missoula back in the mid-1970s. We were all sitting around drinking and someone told a story about a barmaid named Linda who got drunk with her boyfriend one night and decided to move all of her bedroom furnishings into the backyard. They did it, too, right down to the carpet and the bedroom lamp, the bed, the nightstand, everything. There were about four or five writers in the room, and after the guy finished telling the story, someone said, "Well, who's going to write it?" I don't know who else might have written it, but I wrote it. Not then, but later. About four or five years later, I think. I changed and added things to it, of course. Actually, it was the first story I wrote after I finally stopped drinking.

INTERVIEWER

What are your writing habits like? Are you always working on a story?

CARVER

When I'm writing, I write every day. It's lovely when that's happening. One day dovetailing into the next. Sometimes I don't even know what day of the week it is. The "paddle-wheel of days" John Ashbery has called it. When I'm not writing, like now, when I'm tied up with teaching duties as I have been the last while, it's as if I've never written a word or had any desire to write. I fall into bad habits. I stay up too late and sleep in too long. But it's okay. I've learned to be patient and to bide my time. I had to learn that a long time ago. Patience. If I believed in signs, I suppose my sign would be the sign of the turtle. I write in fits and starts. But when I'm writing, I put in a lot of hours at the desk, ten or twelve or fifteen hours at a stretch, day after day. I love that, when that's happening. Much of this work time, understand, is

given over to revising and rewriting. There's not much that I like better than to take a story that I've had around the house for a while and work it over again. It's the same with the poems I write. I'm in no hurry to send something off just after I write it, and I sometimes keep it around the house for months doing this or that to it, taking this out and putting that in. It doesn't take that long to do the first draft of the story, that usually happens in one sitting, but it does take a while to do the various versions of the story. I've done as many as twenty or thirty drafts of a story. Never less than ten or twelve drafts. It's instructive, and heartening both, to look at the early drafts of great writers. I'm thinking of the photographs of galleys belonging to Tolstoy, to name one writer who loved to revise. I mean, I don't know if he loved it or not, but he did a great deal of it. He was always revising, right down to the time of page proofs. He went through and rewrote *War and Peace* eight times and was still making corrections in the galleys. Things like this should hearten every writer whose first drafts are dreadful, like mine are.

INTERVIEWER

Describe what happens when you write a story.

CARVER

I write the first draft quickly, as I said. This is most often done in longhand. I simply fill up the pages as rapidly as I can. In some cases, there's a kind of personal shorthand, notes to myself for what I will do later when I come back to it. Some scenes I have to leave unfinished, unwritten in some cases; the scenes that will require meticulous care later. I mean all of it requires meticulous care—but some scenes I save until the second or third draft, because to do them and do them right would take too much time on the first draft. With the first draft it's a question of getting down the outline, the scaffolding of the story. Then on subsequent revisions I'll see to the rest of it. When I've finished the longhand draft I'll type a version of the story and go from there. It always looks different to me, better, of course, after it's typed

up. When I'm typing the first draft, I'll begin to rewrite and add and delete a little then. The real work comes later, after I've done three or four drafts of the story. It's the same with the poems, only the poems may go through forty or fifty drafts. Donald Hall told me he sometimes writes a hundred or so drafts of his poems. Can you imagine?

INTERVIEWER

Has your way of working changed?

CARVER

The stories in *What We Talk About* are different to an extent. For one thing, it's a much more self-conscious book in the sense of how intentional every move was, how calculated. I pushed and pulled and worked with those stories before they went into the book to an extent I'd never done with any other stories. When the book was put together and in the hands of my publisher, I didn't write anything at all for six months. And then the first story I wrote was "Cathedral," which I feel is totally different in conception and execution from any stories that have come before. I suppose it reflects a change in my life as much as it does in my way of writing. When I wrote "Cathedral" I experienced this rush and I felt, "This is what it's all about, this is the reason we do this." It was different than the stories that had come before. There was an opening up when I wrote the story. I knew I'd gone as far the other way as I could or wanted to go, cutting everything down to the marrow, not just to the bone. Any farther in that direction and I'd be at a dead end—writing stuff and publishing stuff I wouldn't want to read myself, and that's the truth. In a review of the last book, somebody called me a "minimalist" writer. The reviewer meant it as a compliment. But I didn't like it. There's something about "minimalist" that smacks of smallness of vision and execution that I don't like. But all of the stories in the new book, the one coming out next fall, were written within an eighteen-month period; and in every one of them I feel this difference.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any sense of an audience? Updike described his ideal reader as a young boy in a small midwestern town finding one of his books on a library shelf.

CARVER

It's nice to think of Updike's idealized reader. But except for the early stories, I don't think it's a young boy in a small midwestern town who's reading Updike. What would this young boy make of *The Centaur* or *Couples* or *Rabbit Redux* or *The Coup*? I think Updike is writing for the audience that John Cheever said he was writing for, "intelligent, adult men and women," wherever they live. Any writer worth his salt writes as well and as truly as he can and hopes for as large and perceptive a readership as possible. So you write as well as you can and hope for good readers. But I think you're also writing for other writers to an extent—the dead writers whose work you admire, as well as the living writers you like to read. If they like it, the other writers, there's a good chance other "intelligent, adult men and women" may like it, too. But I don't have that boy you mentioned, or anyone else in mind for that matter, when I'm doing the writing itself.

INTERVIEWER

How much of what you write do you finally throw away?

CARVER

Lots. If the first draft of the story is forty pages long, it'll usually be half that by the time I'm finished with it. And it's not just a question of taking out or bringing it down. I take out a lot, but I also add things and then add some more and take out some more. It's something I love to do, putting words in and taking words out.

INTERVIEWER

Has the process of revision changed now that the stories seem to be longer and more generous?

CARVER

Generous, yes, that's a good word for them. Yes, and I'll tell you why. Up at school there's a typist who has one of those space-age typewriters, a word processor, and I can give her a story to type and once she has it typed and I get back the fair copy, I can mark it up to my heart's content and give it back to her; and the next day I can have my story back, all fair copy once more. Then I can mark it up again as much as I want, and the next day I'll have back a fair copy once more. I love it. It may seem like a small thing, really, but it's changed my life, that woman and her word processor.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever have any time off from not having to earn a living?

CARVER

I had a year once. It was a very important year for me, too. I wrote most of the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* in that year. It was back in 1970 or 1971. I was working for this textbook publishing firm in Palo Alto. It was my first white collar job, right after the period when I'd been a janitor at the hospital in Sacramento. I'd been working away there quietly as an editor when the company, it was called SRA, decided to do a major reorganization. I planned to quit, I was writing my letter of resignation, but then suddenly—I was fired. It was just wonderful the way it turned out. We invited all of our friends that weekend and had a firing party! For a year I didn't have to work. I drew unemployment and had my severance pay to live on. And that's the period when my wife finished her college degree. That was a turning point, that time. It was a good period.

INTERVIEWER

Are you religious?

CARVER

No, but I have to believe in miracles and the possibility of resurrection. No question about that. Every day that I wake

up, I'm glad to wake up. That's why I like to wake up early. In my drinking days I would sleep until noon or whatever and I would usually wake up with the shakes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you regret a lot of things that happened back then when things were so bad?

CARVER

I can't change anything now. I can't afford to regret. That life is simply gone now, and I can't regret its passing. I have to live in the present. The life back then is gone just as surely—it's as remote to me as if it had happened to somebody I read about in a nineteenth-century novel. I don't spend more than five minutes a month in the past. The past really *is* a foreign country, and they do do things differently there. Things happen. I really do feel I've had two different lives.

INTERVIEWER

Can you talk a little about literary influences, or at least name some writers whose work you greatly admire?

CARVER

Ernest Hemingway is one. The early stories. "Big Two Hearted River," "Cat in the Rain," "The Three Day Blow," "Soldier's Home," lots more. Chekhov. I suppose he's the writer whose work I most admire. But who doesn't like Chekhov? I'm talking about his stories now, not the plays. His plays move too slowly for me. Tolstoy. Any of his short stories, novellas, and *Anna Karenina*. Not *War and Peace*. Too slow. But *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, *Master and Man*, "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" Tolstoy is the best there is. Isaac Babel, Flannery O'Connor, Frank O'Connor. James Joyce's *Dubliners*. John Cheever. *Madame Bovary*. Last year I reread that book, along with a new translation of Flaubert's letters written while he was composing—no other word for it—*Madame Bovary*. Conrad. Updike's *Too Far To Go*. And there are wonderful writers I've come across in the last year or two like Tobias Wolff. His book of stories *In the*

Garden of the North American Martyrs is just wonderful. Max Schott. Bobbie Ann Mason. Did I mention her? Well, she's good and worth mentioning twice. Harold Pinter. V.S. Pritchett. Years ago I read something in a letter by Chekhov that impressed me. It was a piece of advice to one of his many correspondents, and it went something like this: Friend, you don't have to write about extraordinary people who accomplish extraordinary and memorable deeds. (Understand I was in college at the time and reading plays about princes and dukes and the overthrow of kingdoms. Quests and the like, large undertakings to establish heroes in their rightful places. Novels with larger-than-life heroes.) But reading what Chekhov had to say in that letter, and in other letters of his as well, and reading his stories, made me see things differently than I had before. Not long afterwards I read a play and a number of stories by Maxim Gorky, and he simply reinforced in his work what Chekhov had to say. Richard Ford is another fine writer. He's primarily a novelist, but he's also written stories and essays. He's a friend. I have a lot of friends who are good friends, and some of them are good writers. Some not so good.

INTERVIEWER

What do you do in that case? I mean, how do you handle that—if one of your friends publishes something you don't like?

CARVER

I don't say anything unless the friend asks me, and I hope he doesn't. But if you're asked you have to say what you think, of course. But you try to say it in a way that it doesn't wreck the friendship. You want your friends to do well and write the best they can. But sometimes their work is a disappointment. You want everything to go well for them, but you have this dread that maybe it won't and there's not much you can do.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of moral fiction? I guess this has to lead

into talk about John Gardner and his influence on you. I know you were his student many years ago at Chico State College.

CARVER

That's true. I've written about our relationship in the *Antaeus* piece and elaborated on it more in my introduction to a posthumous book of his called *On Becoming a Novelist*. I think *On Moral Fiction* is a wonderfully smart book. I don't agree with all of it, by any means, but generally he's right. Not so much in his assessments of living writers as in the aims, the aspirations of the book. It's a book that wants to affirm life rather than trash it. Gardner's definition of morality is life-affirming. And in that regard he believes good fiction is moral fiction. It's a book to argue with, if you like to argue. It's brilliant, in any case. I think he may argue his case even better in *On Becoming a Novelist*. And he doesn't go after other writers as he did in *On Moral Fiction*. We had been out of touch with each other for years when he published *On Moral Fiction*, but his influence, the things he stood for in my life when I was his student, were still so strong that for a long while I didn't want to read the book. I was afraid to find out that what I'd been writing all these years was immoral! You understand that we'd not seen each other for nearly twenty years and had only renewed our friendship after I'd moved to Syracuse and he was down there at Binghamton, seventy miles away. There was a lot of anger directed toward Gardner and the book when it was published. He touched nerves. I happen to think it's a remarkable piece of work.

INTERVIEWER

But after you read the book, what did you think then about your own work? Were you writing "moral" or "immoral" stories?

CARVER

I'm still not sure! But I heard from other people, and then

he told me himself, that he liked my work. Especially the new work. That pleases me a great deal. Read *On Becoming a Novelist*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still write poetry?

CARVER

Some, but not enough. I want to write more. If too long a period of time goes by, six months or so, I get nervous if I haven't written any poems. I find myself wondering if I've stopped being a poet or stopped being able to write poetry. It's usually then that I sit down and try to write some poems. This book of mine that's coming in the spring, *Fires*—that's got all of the poems of mine I want to keep.

INTERVIEWER

How do they influence each other? The writing of fiction and the writing of poetry?

CARVER

They don't any longer. For a long time I was equally interested in the writing of poetry and the writing of fiction. In magazines I always turned to the poems first before I read the stories. Finally, I had to make a choice, and I came down on the side of the fiction. It was the right choice for me. I'm not a "born" poet. I don't know if I'm a "born" anything except a white American male. Maybe I'll become an occasional poet. But I'll settle for that. That's better than not being any kind of poet at all.

INTERVIEWER

How has fame changed you?

CARVER

I feel uncomfortable with that word. You see, I started out with such low expectations in the first place—I mean how far are you going to get in this life writing short stories? And I didn't have much self-esteem as a result of this drinking

thing. So it's a continual amazement to me, this attention that's come along. But I can tell you that after the reception for *What We Talk About*, I felt a confidence that I've never felt before. Every good thing that's happened since has conjoined to make me want to do even more and better work. It's been a good spur. And all this is coming at a time in my life when I have more strength than I've ever had before. Do you know what I'm saying? I feel stronger and more certain of my direction now than ever before. So "fame"—or let's say this new-found attention and interest—has been a good thing. It bolstered my confidence, when my confidence needed bolstering.

INTERVIEWER

Who reads your writing first?

CARVER

Tess Gallagher. As you know, she's a poet and short-story writer herself. I show her everything I write except for letters, and I've even shown her a few of those. But she has a wonderful eye and a way of feeling herself into what I write. I don't show her anything until I've marked it up and taken it as far as I can. That's usually the fourth or fifth draft, and then she reads every subsequent draft thereafter. So far I've dedicated three books to her and those dedications are not just a token of love and affection; they also indicate the high esteem in which I hold her and an acknowledgement of the help and inspiration she's given me.

INTERVIEWER

Would you consider doing more movie script work?

CARVER

If the subject could be as interesting as this one I just finished with Michael Cimino on the life of Dostoyevsky, yes, of course. Otherwise, no. But Dostoyevsky! You bet I would.

INTERVIEWER

And there was real money involved.

CARVER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

That accounts for the Mercedes.

CARVER

That's it.

INTERVIEWER

What about the *New Yorker*? Did you ever send your stories to the *New Yorker* when you were first starting out?

CARVER

No, I didn't. I didn't read the *New Yorker*. I sent my stories and poems to the little magazines and once in a while something was accepted, and I was made happy by the acceptance. I had some kind of audience, you see, even though I never met any of my audience.

INTERVIEWER

Do you get letters from people who've read your work?

CARVER

Letters, tapes, sometimes photographs. Somebody just sent me a cassette—songs that had been made out of some of the stories.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write better on the West Coast—out in Washington—or here in the East? I guess I'm asking how important a sense of place is to your work.

CARVER

Once, it was important to see myself as a writer from a particular place. It was important for me to be a writer from the West. But that's not true any longer, for better or worse. I think I've moved around too much, lived in too many places, felt dislocated and displaced, to now have any firmly-rooted

sense of "place." If I've ever gone about consciously locating a story in a particular place and period, and I guess I have, especially in the first book, I suppose that place would be the Pacific Northwest. I admire the sense of place in such writers as Jim Welch, Wallace Stegner, John Keeble, William Eastlake, and William Kittredge. There are plenty of good writers with this sense of place you're talking about. But the majority of my stories are not set in any specific locale. I mean they could take place in just about any city or urban area; here in Syracuse, but also Tucson, Sacramento, San Jose, San Francisco, Seattle, or Port Angeles, Washington. In any case, most of my stories are set indoors!

INTERVIEWER

Do you work in a particular place in your house?

CARVER

Yes, upstairs in my study. It's important to me to have my own place. Lots of days go by when we just unplug the telephone and put out our "No Visitors" sign. For many years I worked at the kitchen table, or in a library carrel, or else out in my car. This room of my own is a luxury *and* a necessity now.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still hunt and fish?

CARVER

Not so much any more. I still fish a little, fish for salmon in the summer, if I'm out in Washington. But I don't hunt, I'm sorry to say. I don't know where to go! I guess I could find someone who'd take me, but I just haven't gotten around to it. But my friend Richard Ford is a hunter. When he was up here in the spring of 1981 to give a reading from his work, he took the proceeds from his reading and bought me a shotgun. Imagine that! And he had it inscribed, "For Raymond from Richard, April 1981." Richard is a hunter, you see, and I think he was trying to encourage me.

INTERVIEWER

How do you hope your stories will affect people? Do you think your writing will change anybody?

CARVER

I really don't know. I doubt it. Not change in any profound sense. Maybe not any change at all. After all, art is a form of entertainment, yes? For both the maker and the consumer. I mean in a way it's like shooting billiards or playing cards, or bowling—it's just a different, and I would say higher, form of amusement. I'm not saying there isn't spiritual nourishment involved, too. There is, of course. Listening to a Beethoven concerto or spending time in front of a Van Gogh painting or reading a poem by Blake can be a profound experience on a scale that playing bridge or bowling a '220' game can never be. Art is all the things art is supposed to be. But art is also a superior amusement. Am I wrong in thinking this? I don't know. But I remember in my twenties reading plays by Strindberg, a novel by Max Frisch, Rilke's poetry, listening all night to music by Bartok, watching a TV special on the Sistine Chapel and Michaelangelo and feeling in each case that my life *had* to change after these experiences, it couldn't help but be affected by these experiences and *changed*. There was simply no way I would not become a different person. But then I found out soon enough my life was not going to change after all. Not in any way that I could see, perceptible or otherwise. I understood then that art was something I could pursue when I had the time for it, when I could afford to do so, and that's all. Art was a luxury and it wasn't going to change me or my life. I guess I came to the hard realization that art doesn't make anything happen. No. I don't believe for a minute in that absurd Shellyian nonsense having to do with poets as the "unacknowledged legislators" of this world. What an idea! Isak Dinesen said that she wrote a little every day, without hope and without despair. I like that. The days are gone, if they were ever with us, when a novel or a play or a book of poems could change people's ideas about the world they live in or even about themselves.

Maybe writing fiction about particular kinds of people living particular kinds of lives will allow certain areas of life to be understood a little better than they were understood before. But I'm afraid that's it, at least as far as I'm concerned. Perhaps it's different in poetry. Tess has had letters from people who have read her poems and say the poems saved them from jumping off a cliff or drowning themselves, etc. But that's something else. Good fiction is partly a bringing of the news from one world to another. That end is good in and of itself, I think. But changing things through fiction, changing somebody's political affiliation or the political system itself, or saving the whales or the redwood trees, no. Not if these are the kinds of changes you mean. And I don't think it should have to do any of these things, either. It doesn't *have* to do anything. It just has to be there for the fierce pleasure we take in doing it, and the different kind of pleasure that's taken in reading something that's durable and made to last, as well as beautiful in and of itself. Something that throws off these sparks—a persistent and steady glow, however dim.

—Mona Simpson

Careful

Raymond Carver

After a lot of talking — what his wife, Inez, called *assessment* — Lloyd moved out of the house and into his own place. He had two rooms and a bath on the top floor of a three-story house. Inside the rooms, the roof slanted down sharply. If he walked around, he had to duck his head. He had to stoop to look from his windows and be careful getting in and out of bed. There were two keys. One key let him into the house itself. Then he climbed some stairs that passed through the house to a landing. He went up another flight of stairs to the door of his room and used the other key on that lock.

Once, when he was coming back to his place in the afternoon, carrying a sack with three bottles of André champagne and some lunch meat, he stopped on the landing and looked into his landlady's living room. He saw the old woman lying on her back on the carpet. She seemed to be asleep. Then it occurred to him she might be dead. But the TV was going, so he chose to think she was asleep. He didn't know what to make of it. He moved the sack from one arm to the other.

It was then that the woman gave a little cough, brought her hand to her side, and went back to being quiet and still again. Lloyd continued on up the stairs and unlocked his door. Later that day, toward evening, as he looked from his kitchen window, he saw the old woman down in the yard, wearing a straw hat and holding her hand against her side. She was using a little watering can on some pansies.

In his kitchen, he had a combination refrigerator and stove. The refrigerator and stove was a tiny affair wedged into a space between the sink and the wall. He had to bend over, almost get down on his knees, to get anything out of the refrigerator. But it was all right because he didn't keep much in there, anyway—except fruit juice, lunch meat, and champagne. The stove had two burners. Now and then he heated water in a saucepan and made instant coffee. But some days he didn't drink any coffee. He forgot, or else he just didn't feel like coffee. One morning he woke up and promptly fell to eating crumb doughnuts and drinking champagne. There'd been a time, some years back, when he would have laughed at having a breakfast like this. Now, there didn't seem to be anything very unusual about it. In fact, he hadn't thought anything about it until he was in bed and trying to recall the things he'd done that day, starting with when he'd gotten up that morning. At first, he couldn't remember anything noteworthy. Then he remembered eating those doughnuts and drinking champagne. There was a time when he would have considered this a mildly crazy thing to do, something to tell friends about. Then, the more he thought about it, the more he could see it didn't matter much one way or the other. He'd had doughnuts and champagne for breakfast. So what?

In his furnished rooms, he also had a dinette set, a little sofa, an old easy chair, and a TV set that stood on a coffee table. He wasn't paying the electricity here, it wasn't even his TV, so sometimes he left the set on all day and all night. But he kept the volume down unless he saw there was something he wanted to watch. He did not have a telephone, which was fine with him. He didn't want a telephone. There was a bed-

room with a double bed, a nightstand, and a chest of drawers. A bathroom gave off from the bedroom.

The one time Inez came to visit, it was eleven o'clock in the morning. He'd been in his new place for two weeks, and he'd been wondering if she were going to drop by. But he was trying to do something about his drinking, too, so he was glad to be alone. He'd made that much clear—being alone was the thing he needed most. The day she came, he was on the sofa, in his pajamas, hitting his fist against the right side of his head. Just before he could hit himself again, he heard voices downstairs on the landing. He could make out his wife's voice. The sound was like the murmur of voices from a faraway crowd, but he knew it was Inez and somehow knew the visit was an important one. He gave his head another jolt with his fist, then got to his feet.

He'd awakened that morning and found that his ear had stopped up with wax. He couldn't hear anything clearly, and he seemed to have lost his sense of balance, his equilibrium, in the process. For the last hour he'd been on the sofa, working frustratedly on his ear, now and again slamming his head with his fist. Once in a while he'd massage the gristly underpart of his ear, or else tug at his lobe. Then he'd dig furiously in his ear with his little finger and open his mouth, simulating yawns. But he'd tried everything he could think of, and he was nearing the end of his rope. He could hear the voices below break off their murmuring. He pounded his head a good one and finished the glass of champagne. He turned off the TV and carried the glass to the sink. He picked up the open bottle of champagne from the drainboard and took it into the bathroom where he put it behind the stool. Then he went to answer the door.

"Hi, Lloyd," Inez said. She didn't smile. She stood in the doorway in a bright spring outfit. He hadn't seen these clothes before. She was holding a canvas handbag that had sunflowers stitched onto its sides. He hadn't seen the handbag before, either.

"I didn't think you heard me," she said. "I thought you might be gone or something. But the woman downstairs—

what's her name? Mrs. Matthews—she thought you were up here."

"I heard you," Lloyd said. "But just barely." He hitched his pajamas and ran a hand through his hair. "Actually, I'm in one hell of a shape. Come on in."

"It's eleven o'clock," she said. She came inside and shut the door behind her. She acted as if she hadn't heard him. Maybe she hadn't.

"I know what time it is," he said. "I've been up for a long time. I've been up since eight. I watched part of the *Today* show. But just now I'm about to go crazy with something. My ear's plugged up. You remember that other time it happened? We were living in that place near the Chinese take-out joint. Where the kids found that bulldog dragging its chain? I had to go to the doctor then and have my ears flushed out. I know you remember. You drove me and we had to wait a long time. Well, it's like that now. I mean it's that bad. Only I can't go to a doctor this morning. I don't have a doctor, for one thing. I'm about to go nuts, Inez. I feel like I want to cut off my head or something."

He sat down at one end of the sofa, and she sat down at the other end. But it was a small sofa, and they were still sitting close to each other. They were so close he could have put out his hand and touched her knee. But he didn't. She glanced around the room and then fixed her eyes on him again. He knew he hadn't shaved and that his hair stood up. But she was his wife, and she knew everything there was to know about him.

"What have you tried?" she said. She looked in her purse and brought up a cigarette. "I mean, what have you done for it so far?"

"What'd you say?" He turned the left side of his head to her. "Inez, I swear, I'm not exaggerating. This thing is driving me crazy. When I talk, I feel like I'm talking inside a barrel. My head rumbles. And I can't hear good, either. When *you* talk, it sounds like you're talking through a lead pipe."

"Do you have any Q-tips, or else Wesson oil?" Inez said.

"Honey, this is serious," he said. "I don't have any Q-tips

or Wesson oil. Are you kidding?"

"If we had some Wesson oil, I could heat it and put some of that in your ear. My mother used to do that," she said. "It might soften things up in there."

He shook his head. His head felt full and like it was awash with fluid. It felt like it had when he used to swim near the bottom of the municipal pool and come up with his ears filled with water. But back then it'd been easy to clear the water out. All he had to do was fill his lungs with air, close his mouth and clamp down on his nose. Then he'd blow out his cheeks and force air into his head. His ears would pop, and for a few seconds he'd have the pleasant sensation of water running out of his head and dripping onto his shoulders. Then he'd heave himself out of the pool.

Inez finished her cigarette and put it out. "Lloyd, we have things to talk about. But I guess we'll have to take things one at a time. Go sit in the chair. Not *that* chair, the chair in the kitchen! So we can have some light on the situation."

He whacked his head once more. Then he went over to sit on a dinette chair. She moved over and stood behind him. She touched his hair with her fingers. Then she moved the hair away from his ears. He reached for her hand, but she drew it away.

"Which ear did you say it was?" she said.

"The right ear," he said. "The right one."

"First," she said, "you have to sit here and not move. I'll find a hairpin and some tissue paper. I'll try to get in there with that. Maybe it'll do the trick."

He was alarmed at the prospect of her putting a hairpin inside his ear. He said something to that effect.

"What?" she said. "Christ, I can't hear you, either. Maybe this is catching."

"When I was a kid, in school," Lloyd said, "we had this health teacher. She was like a nurse, too. She said we should never put anything smaller than an elbow into our ear." He vaguely remembered a wall chart showing a massive diagram of the ear, along with an intricate system of canals, passageways, and walls.

"Well, your nurse was never faced with this exact problem," Inez said. "Anyway, we need to try *something*. We'll try this first. If it doesn't work, we'll try something else. That's life, isn't it?"

"Does that have a hidden meaning or something?" Lloyd said.

"It means just what I said. But you're free to think as you please. I mean, it's a free country," she said. "Now, let me get fixed up with what I need. You just sit there."

She went through her purse, but she didn't find what she was looking for. Finally, she emptied the purse out onto the sofa. "No hairpins," she said. "Damn." But it was as if she were saying the words from another room. In a way, it was almost as if he'd imagined her saying them. There'd been a time, long ago, when they used to feel they had ESP when it came to what the other one was thinking. They could finish sentences that the other had started.

She picked up some nail clippers, worked for a minute, and then he saw the device separate in her fingers and part of it swing away from the other part. A nail file protruded from the clippers. It looked to him as if she were holding a small dagger.

"You're going to put that in my ear?" he said.

"Maybe you have a better idea," she said. "It's this, or else I don't know what. Maybe you have a pencil? You want me to use that? Or maybe you have a screwdriver around," she said and laughed. "Don't worry. Listen, Lloyd, I won't hurt you. I said I'd be careful. I'll wrap some tissue around the end of this. It'll be all right. I'll be careful, like I said. You just stay where you are, and I'll get some tissues for this. I'll make a swab."

She went into the bathroom. She was gone for a time. He stayed where he was on the dinette chair. He began thinking of things he ought to say to her. He wanted to tell her he was limiting himself to champagne and champagne only. He wanted to tell her he was tapering off the champagne, too. It was only a matter of time now. But when she came back into the room, he couldn't say anything. He didn't know

where to start. But she didn't look at him, anyway. She fished a cigarette from the heap of things she'd emptied onto the sofa cushion. She lit the cigarette with her lighter and went to stand by the window that faced onto the street. She said something, but he couldn't make out the words. When she stopped talking, he didn't ask her what it was she'd said. Whatever it was, he knew he didn't want her to say it again. She put out the cigarette. But she went on standing at the window, leaning forward, the slope of the roof just inches from her head.

"Inez," he said.

She turned and came over to him. He could see tissue on the point of the nail file.

"Turn your head to the side and keep it that way," she said. "That's right. Sit still now and don't move. Don't move," she said again.

"Be careful," he said. "For Christ's sake."

She didn't answer him.

"Please, please," he said. Then he didn't say any more. He was afraid. He closed his eyes and held his breath as he felt the nail file turn past the inner part of his ear and begin its probe. He was sure his heart would stop beating. Then she went a little farther and began turning the blade back and forth, working at whatever it was in there. Inside his ear, he heard a squeaking sound.

"Ouch!" he said.

"Did I hurt you?" She took the nail file out of his ear and moved back a step. "Does anything feel different, Lloyd?"

He brought his hands up to his ears and lowered his head.

"It's just the same," he said.

She looked at him and bit her lips.

"Let me go to the bathroom," he said. "Before we go any farther, I have to go to the bathroom."

"Go ahead," Inez said. "I think I'll go downstairs and see if your landlady has any Wesson oil, or anything like that. She might even have some Q-tips. I don't know why I didn't think of that before. Of asking her."

"That's a good idea," he said. "I'll go to the bathroom."

She stopped at the door and looked at him, and then she opened the door and went out. He crossed the living room, went into his bedroom, and opened the bathroom door. He reached down behind the stool and brought up the bottle of champagne. He took a long drink. It was warm, but it went right down. He took some more. In the beginning, he'd really thought he could continue drinking if he limited himself to champagne. But in no time he found he was drinking three or four bottles a day. He knew he'd have to deal with this pretty soon. But first, he'd have to get his hearing back. One thing at a time, just like she'd said. He finished off the rest of the champagne and put the empty bottle in its place behind the stool. Then he ran water and brushed his teeth. After he'd used the towel, he went back into the other room.

Inez had returned and was at the stove heating something in a little pan. She glanced in his direction, but didn't say anything at first. He looked past her shoulder and out the window. A bird flew from the branch of one tree to another and preened its feathers. But if it made any kind of bird noise, he didn't hear it.

She said something that he didn't catch.

"Say again," he said.

She shook her head and turned back to the stove. But then she turned again and said, loud enough and slow enough so he could hear it: "I found your stash in the bathroom."

"I'm trying to cut back," he said.

She said something else. "What?" he said. "What'd you say?" He really hadn't heard her.

"We'll talk later," she said. "We have things to discuss, Lloyd. Money is one thing. But there are other things, too. First we have to see about this ear." She put her finger into the pan and then took the pan off the stove. "I'll let it cool for a minute," she said. "It's too hot right now. Sit down. Put this towel around your shoulders."

He did as he was told. He sat on the chair and put the towel around his neck and shoulders. Then he hit the side of his head with his fist.

"Goddamn it," he said.

She didn't look up. She put her finger into the pan once more, testing. Then she poured the liquid from the pan into his plastic glass. She picked up the glass and came over to him.

"Don't be scared," she said. "It's just some of your landlady's baby oil, that's all it is. I told her what was wrong, and she thought this might help. No guarantees," Inez said. "But maybe this'll loosen things up in there. She said it used to happen to her husband. She said this one time she saw a piece of wax fall out of his ear, and it was like a big plug of something. It was ear wax was what it was. She said try this. And she didn't have any Q-tips. I can't understand that, her not having any Q-tips. That part really surprises me."

"Okay," he said. "All right. I'm willing to try anything. Inez, if I had to go on like this, I think I'd rather be dead. You know? I mean it, Inez."

"Tilt your head all the way to the side now," she said. "Don't move. I'll pour this in until your ear fills up, then I'll stopper it with this dishrag. And you just sit there for ten minutes, say. Then we'll see. If this doesn't do it, well, I don't have any other suggestions. I just don't know what to do then."

"This'll work," he said. "If this doesn't do it, I'll find a gun and shoot myself. I'm serious. That's what I feel like doing, anyway."

He turned his head to the side and let it hang down. He looked at the things in the room from this new perspective. But it wasn't any different from the old way of looking, except that everything was on its side.

"Farther," she said. He held onto the chair for balance and lowered his head even more. All of the objects in his vision, all of the objects in his life, it seemed, were at the far end of this room. He could feel the warm liquid pour into his ear. Then she brought the dishrag up and held it there. In a little while, she began to massage the area around his ear. She pressed into the soft part of the flesh between his jaw and skull. She moved her fingers to the area over his ear and began to work the tips of her fingers back and forth. After

a while, he didn't know how long he'd been sitting there. It could have been ten minutes. It could have been longer. He was still holding onto the chair. Now and then, as her fingers pressed the side of his head, he could feel the warm oil she'd poured in there wash back and forth in the canals inside his ear. When she pressed a certain way, he imagined he could hear, inside his head, a soft, swishing sound.

"Sit up straight," Inez said. He sat up and pressed the heel of his hand against his head while the liquid poured out of his ear. She caught it in the towel. Then she wiped the outside of his ear.

Inez was breathing through her nose. Lloyd heard the sound her breath made as it came and went. He heard a car pass on the street outside the house and, at the back of the house, down below his kitchen window, the clear *snick-snick* of pruning shears.

"Well?" Inez said. She waited with her hands on her hips, frowning.

"I can hear you," he said. "I'm all right! I mean I can *hear*. It doesn't sound like you're talking underwater anymore. It's fine now. It's okay. God, I thought for a while I was going to go crazy. But I feel fine now. I can hear everything. Listen, honey, I'll make coffee. There's some juice, too."

"I have to go," she said. "I'm late for something. But I'll come back. We'll go out for lunch sometime. We need to talk."

"I just can't sleep on this side of my head, is all," he went on. He followed her into the living room. She lit a cigarette. "That's what happened. I slept all night on this side of my head, and my ear plugged up. I think I'll be all right as long as I don't forget and sleep on this side of my head. If I'm careful. You know what I'm saying? If I can just sleep on my back, or else on my left side."

She didn't look at him.

"Not forever, of course not, I know that. I couldn't do that. I couldn't do it the rest of my life. But for a while, anyway. Just my left side, or else flat on my back."

But even as he said this he began to feel afraid of the night

that was coming. He began to fear the moment he would begin to make his preparations for bed and what might happen afterwards. That time was hours away, but already he was afraid. What if, in the middle of the night, he accidentally turned onto his right side, and the weight of his head pressing into the pillow were to seal the wax again into the dark canals of his ear? What if he woke up then, unable to hear, the ceiling inches from his head?

"Good God," he said. "Jesus, this is awful. Inez, I just had something like a terrible nightmare. Inez, where do you have to go?"

"I told you," she said, as she put everything back into her purse and made ready to leave. She looked at her watch. "I'm late for something." She went to the door. But at the door she turned and said something else to him. He didn't listen. He didn't want to. He watched her lips move until she said what she had to say. When she'd finished, she said, "Good-bye." Then she opened the door and closed it behind her.

He went into the bedroom to dress. But in a minute he hurried out, wearing only his trousers, and went to the door. He opened it and stood there, listening. On the landing below, he heard Inez thank Mrs. Matthews for the oil. He heard the old woman say, "You're welcome." And then he heard her draw a connection between her late husband and himself. He heard her say, "Leave me your number. I'll call if something happens. You never know."

"I hope you don't have to," Inez said. "But I'll give it to you, anyway. Do you have something to write it down with?"

Lloyd heard Mrs. Matthews open a drawer and rummage through it. Then her old woman's voice said, "Okay."

Inez gave her their telephone number at home. "Thanks," she said.

"It was nice meeting you," Mrs. Matthews said.

He listened as Inez went on down the stairs and opened the front door. Then he heard it close. He waited until he heard her start their car and drive away. Then he shut the door and went back into the bedroom to finish dressing.

After he'd put on his shoes and tied the laces, he lay down

on the bed and pulled the covers up to his chin. He let his arms rest under the covers at his side. He closed his eyes and pretended it was night and pretended he was going to fall asleep. Then he brought his arms up and crossed them over his chest to see how this position would suit him. He kept his eyes closed, trying it out. All right, he thought. Okay. If he didn't want that ear to plug up again, he'd have to sleep on his back, that was all. He knew he could do it. He just couldn't forget, even in his sleep, and turn onto the wrong side. Four or five hours sleep a night was all he needed anyway. He'd manage. Worse things could happen to a man. In a way, it was a challenge. But he was up to it. He knew he was. In a minute, he threw back the covers and got up.

He still had the better part of the day ahead of him. He went into the kitchen, bent down in front of the little refrigerator, and took out a fresh bottle of champagne. He worked the plastic cork out of the bottle as carefully as he could, but there was still the festive *pop* of champagne being opened. He rinsed the baby oil out of his glass, then poured it full of champagne. He took the glass over to the sofa and sat down. He put the glass on the coffee table. Up went his feet onto the coffee table, next to the champagne. He leaned back. But after a time, he began to worry some more about the night that was coming on. What if, despite all his efforts, the wax decided to plug his other ear? He closed his eyes and shook his head. Pretty soon, he got up and went into the bedroom. He undressed and put his pajamas back on. Then he moved back into the living room. He sat down on the sofa once more, and once more put his feet up. He reached over and turned the TV on. He adjusted the volume. He knew he couldn't keep from worrying about what might happen when he went to bed. It was just something he'd have to learn to live with. In a way, this whole business reminded him of the thing with the doughnuts and champagne. It was not that remarkable at all, if you thought about it. He took some champagne. But it didn't taste right. He ran his tongue over his lips, then wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He looked and saw a film of oil on the champagne.

He got up and carried the glass to the sink where he poured it into the drain. He took the bottle of champagne into the living room and made himself comfortable on the sofa. He held the bottle by its neck as he drank. He'd never before drunk straight from the bottle, but it didn't seem that much out of the ordinary. He decided that even if he were to fall asleep sitting up on the sofa in the middle of the afternoon, it wouldn't be any more strange than somebody having to lie on his back for hours at a time. He lowered his head to peer out the window. Judging from the angle of the sunlight, and the shadows that had entered the room, he guessed it was about three o'clock.

Eluard: Shared Nights

translated by Lydia Davis

At the end of a long journey, I can still see that corridor, that moleskin, that warm shadow crossed by breezes pure as small children sent by the sea foam, I can still see the room where I came to break the bread of our desires with you, I can still see the pallor of your nakedness that merges in the morning with the disappearing stars. I know that I am going to close my eyes again and recover the conventional shapes and colors that let me approach you. When I open them, it will be to seek in a corner the corruptible sunshade with its pick-axe handle that makes me dread fair weather, sunshine, life, because I no longer love you in broad daylight, because I am sorry for the time when I went off to find you and for the time when I was blind and dumb in the face of the incomprehensible universe and the incoherent system of understanding you were proposing to me.

Haven't you borne enough responsibility for this candor that made me forever turn your wishes against you?

How you've made me think! Now I no longer come to see you except to be more certain of the great mystery that still forms the absurd duration of my life, the absurd duration of a night.

When I arrive, all the boats go off, the storm recedes before them. A shower delivers the dark flowers, their brilliance starts up again and strikes again the walls of wool. I know, you are never sure of anything, but the idea of a lie, the idea of an error are far beyond us. It was so long ago that the stubborn door did not yield, so long ago that boredom fed on the monotony of hope, so long ago that your smiles were tears.

We have refused to let the spectators come in, for there is no spectacle. Remember, for solitude, the empty stage, with no scenery, no actors, no musicians. They call it the theater

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of the world, the world stage, and we two no longer know what it is. We two—I will say these words, we too, for in the stages of those long journeys we made separately, I know it now, we were really together, we were really, we were, we. You didn't and I didn't know enough to add the time that had separated us to the time we were together again, you didn't and I didn't know how to subtract it.

A shadow each, but in the shadow we forget it.

Yet the light gave me beautiful pictures from the negatives of our meetings. I identified you with people whose variety alone justified the name I wanted to give them, always the same name, your name, people I transformed in a flood of light the way we transform springwater by taking it into a glass, the way we transform our hand by putting it into another hand. Even the snow, which was the painful screen behind us where crystal vows melted, even the snow was masked. In the caverns of the earth, crystallized plants looked for the low necklines of the way out.

Fathomless shadows all reaching towards a radiant confusion, I did not see that your name was becoming an illusion, that it no longer lived except on my mouth, and that little by little the face of temptations was appearing real, whole, and alone. It was then that I turned back towards you.

Together again, each time together again forever, your voice overflows your eyes the way an echo overflows the evening sky. I go down towards the shores of your appearance. What are you saying? That you never thought you were alone, that you haven't dreamed since I saw you, that you are like a stone split so as to make two stones more beautiful than their dead mother, that you were yesterday's woman and that you are today's woman, that you don't need to be consoled since you cleft yourself in order to be intact now.

Naked, naked, your breasts are frailer than the perfume of the frosted grass and they bear up your shoulders. Naked. You lift off your dress with the greatest simplicity. And you close your eyes and a shadow falls on a body, the whole shadow falls on the last flames.

The sheaves of the seasons collapse, you show me the bottom of your heart. It is the light of life that grows in the lowering flames, an oasis that grows in the desert fertilized by the desert, fed by desolation. The delicate and hollow freshness takes the place of the spinning hearths that made you think of desiring me. Above you your head of hair slips into the abyss that answers for our distance.

How I can't go on declaring myself your disciple as I did when I was young, how I can't go on agreeing with you that the knife and what it cuts are well tuned. The silence and the piano, the horizon and the expanse.

You thought that with your strength and with your weakness you could reconcile the discords of presence and the harmonies of absence, a naive and awkward union, and the science of privations. But lower than all the rest there was boredom. How do you expect that blind eagle to hold onto our longings?

In the streets, in the fields, you have dispersed a hundred women, you shred the resemblance that binds them together, you have brought a hundred women back together and you can't give them new features in common and they have a hundred faces, a hundred faces that hold your beauty in check.

And in the unity of a shared time, suddenly there came a certain day in a certain year that I couldn't accept. All the other days, all the other nights, but that day I suffered too much. Life, love had lost their anchor. Know that it was not for the sake of anything lasting that I despaired of our understanding. I did not imagine another life before other arms, in other arms. I did not think that one day I would stop being faithful to you, since forever and ever I had understood your thought, and the thought that you exist, that you only cease to exist when I do.

I have told women that I did not like their existence to depend on yours.

And yet life blamed our love. Life relentlessly seeking a

new love, to erase the old love, the dangerous love, life wanted to change loves.

Principles of faith . . . Because principles do not always depend on rules drily written into the white wood of our ancestors, but on charms that are full alive, on glances, attitudes, words, and the signs of youth, purity, passion. Nothing of all that is erased.

I persist in mingling fictions with fearful realities. Un-tenanted houses, I have peopled you with exceptional women, not fat, not thin, not blond, not dark, not silly, not wise, it doesn't much matter, impossibly seductive women, through one detail. Useless things, even the folly that ended in your fabrication was a source of enchantment for me. Indifferent people, I have often listened to you, the way we listen to the sound of the waves and the sound of a ship's engines, deliciously waiting for seasickness. I have become accustomed to the most unaccustomed images. I have seen them where they were not. I have made them as mechanical as my rising and my going to bed. Places, like soap bubbles, have suffered the swelling of my cheeks, the streets have suffered my feet one before the other and the other passes before the one, before two and adds up, women no longer moved but when they were lying down, their open blouses representing the sun. Reason, its head high, its yoke of indifference, ant's-head lantern, reason, makeshift mast for a crazed man, jury mast of a boat . . . as said.

To find reasons for living, I have tried to destroy my reasons for loving you. To find reasons for loving you, I have lived badly.

At the end of a long journey, perhaps I will no longer go towards the door we both know so well, perhaps I will no longer go into the room I have been drawn to so many times by despair and the desire to have done with despair. Because I am a man who cannot overcome his ignorance of himself and his ignorance of fate, perhaps I will choose people unlike the one I had invented.

What good will I be to them?

Break It Down

Lydia Davis

He's sitting there staring at a piece of paper in front of him. He's trying to break it down. He says,

I'm breaking it all down. The ticket was \$600 and then after that there was more for the hotel and food and so on, for just ten days. Say \$80 a day, no, more like \$100 a day. And we made love, say, once a day on the average. That's \$100 a shot. And each time it lasted maybe two or three hours so that would be anywhere from \$33 to \$50 an hour, which is expensive.

Though of course that wasn't all that went on, because we were together almost all day long. She would keep looking at me and every time she looked at me it was worth something, and she smiled at me and didn't stop talking and singing, something I said, she would sail into it, a snatch, for me, she would be gone from me a little ways but smiling too, and tell me jokes, and I loved it but didn't exactly know what to do about it and just smiled back at her and felt slow next to her, just not quick enough. So she talked and touched me on

the shoulder and the arm, she kept touching and stayed close to me. You're with each other all day long and it keeps happening, the touches and smiles, and it adds up, it builds up, and you know where you'll be that night, you're talking and every now and then you think about it, no, you don't think, you just feel it as a kind of destination, what's coming up after you leave wherever you are all evening and you're happy about it and you're planning it all, not in your head, really, somewhere inside your body, or all through your body, it's all mounting up and coming together so that when you get in bed you can't help it, it's a real performance, it all pours out, but slowly, you go easy until you can't anymore, or you hold back the whole time, you hold back and touch the edges of everything, you edge around until you have to plunge in and finish it off, and when you're finished, you're too weak to stand but after a while you have to go to the bathroom and you stand, your legs are trembling, you hold the doorways, there's a little light coming in through the window, you can see your way in and out, but you can't really see the bed.

So it's not really \$100 a shot because it goes on all day, from the start when you wake up and feel her body next to you, and you don't miss a thing, not a thing of what's next to you, her arm, her leg, her shoulder, her face, that good skin, I have felt other good skin, but this skin is just the edge of something else, and you're going to start going, and no matter how much you crawl all over each other it won't be enough, and when your hunger dies down a little then you think how much you love her and that starts you off again, and her face, you look over at her face and can't believe how you got there and how lucky and it's still all a surprise and it never stops, even after it's over, it never stops being a surprise.

It's more like you have a good sixteen or eighteen hours a day of this going on, even when you're not with her it's going on, it's good to be away because it's going to be so good to go back to her, so it's still there, and you can't go off and look at some old street or some old painting without still feeling it in your body and a few things that happened the day

before that don't mean much by themselves or wouldn't mean much if you weren't having this thing together, but you can't forget and it's all inside you all the time, so that's more like, say, sixteen into a hundred would be \$6 an hour, which isn't too much.

And then it really keeps going on while you're asleep, though you're probably dreaming about something else, a building, maybe, I kept dreaming, every night, almost, about this building, because I would spend a lot of every morning in this old stone building and when I closed my eyes I would see these cool spaces and have this peace inside me, I would see the bricks of the floor and the stone arches and the space, the emptiness between, like a kind of dark frame around what I could see beyond, a garden, and this space was like stone too because of the coolness of it and the gray shadow, that kind of luminous shade, that was glowing with the light of the sun falling beyond the arches, and there was also the great height of the ceiling, all this was in my mind all the time though I didn't know it until I closed my eyes, I'm asleep and I'm not dreaming about her but she's lying next to me and I wake up enough times in the night to remember she's there, and notice, say, once she was lying on her back but now she's curled around me, I look at her closed eyes, I want to kiss her eyelids, I want to feel that soft skin under my lips, but I don't want to disturb her, I don't want to see her frown as though in her sleep she has forgotten who I am and feels just that something is bothering her and so I just look at her and hold onto it all, these times when I'm watching over her sleep and she's next to me and isn't away from me the way she will be later, I want to stay awake all night just to go on feeling that, but I can't, I fall asleep again, though I'm sleeping lightly, still trying to hold onto it.

But it isn't over when it ends, it goes on after it's all over, she's still inside you like a sweet liquor, you are filled with her, everything about her has kind of bled into you, her smell, her voice, the way her body moves, it's all inside you, at least for a while after, then you begin to lose it, and I'm beginning to lose it, you're afraid of how weak you are, that

you can't get her all back into you again and now the whole thing is going out of your body and it's more in your mind than your body, the pictures come to you one by one and you look at them, some of them last longer than others, you were together in a very white clean place, a coffeehouse, having breakfast together and the place is so white that against it you can see her clearly, her blue eyes, her smile, the colors of her clothes, even the print of the newspaper she's reading when she's not looking up at you, the light brown and red and gold of her hair when she's got her head down reading, the brown coffee, the brown rolls, all against that white table and those white plates and silver urns and silver knives and spoons, and against that quiet of the sleepy people in that room sitting alone at *their tables* with just some *chinking and clattering* of spoons and cups in saucers and some hushed voices her voice now and then rising and falling. The pictures come to you and you have to hope they won't lose their life too fast and dry up though you know they will and that you'll also forget some of what happened because already you're turning up little things that you nearly forgot.

We were in bed and she asked me, Do I seem fat to you? and I was surprised because she didn't seem to worry about herself at all in that way and I guess I was reading into it that she did worry about herself so I answered what I was thinking and said stupidly that she had a very beautiful body, that her body was perfect, and I really meant it as an answer, but she said kind of sharply, That's not what I asked, and so I had to try to answer her again, exactly what she had asked.

And once she lay over against me late in the night and she started talking, her breath in my ear, and she just went on and on, and talked faster and faster, she couldn't stop, and I loved it, I just felt that all that life in her was running into me too, I had so little life in me, her life, her fire, was coming into me, in that hot breath in my ear, and I just wanted her to go on talking forever right there next to me, and I would go on living, like that, I would be able to go on living, but without her I don't know.

Then you forget some of it all, maybe most of it all, almost

all of it, in the end, and you work hard at remembering everything now so you won't ever forget, but you can kill it too even by thinking about it too much, though you can't help thinking about it nearly all the time.

And then when the pictures start to go you start asking some questions, just little questions, that sit in your mind without any answers, like why did she have the light on when you came in to bed one night, but it was off the next, but she had it on the night after that and she had it off the last night, why, and other questions, little questions that nag at you like that.

And finally the pictures go and these dry little questions just sit there without any answers and you're left with this large heavy pain in you that you try to numb by reading or you try to ease it by getting out into public places where there will be people around you, but no matter how good you are at pushing that pain away, just when you think you're going to be all right for a while, that you're kind of holding it off with all your strength and you're staying in some little bare numb spot of ground, then suddenly it will all come back, you'll hear a noise, maybe it's a cat crying or a baby, or something else like her cry, you hear it and make that connection in a part of you you have no control over and the pain comes back so hard that you're afraid, afraid of how you're falling back into it again and you wonder, no, you're terrified to ask how you're ever going to climb out of it.

And so it's not only every hour of the day while it's happening, but it's really for hours and hours every day after that, for weeks, though less and less, so that you could work out the ratio if you wanted, maybe after six weeks you're only thinking about it an hour or so in the day altogether, a few minutes here and there spread over, or a few minutes here and there and half an hour before you go to sleep, or sometimes it all comes back and you stay awake with it half the night.

So when you add up all that you've only spent maybe \$3 an hour on it.

If you have to figure in the bad times too, I don't know.

There weren't any bad times with her, though maybe there was one bad time, when I told her I loved her, I couldn't help it, because this was the first time this had happened with her, now I was half falling in love with her or maybe completely if she had let me but she couldn't or I couldn't completely because it was all going to be so short and other things too, and so I told her, and didn't know of any way to tell her first that she didn't have to feel this was a burden, the fact that I loved her, or that she didn't have to feel the same about me, or say the same back, that it was just that I had to tell her, that's all, because it was bursting inside me, and saying it wouldn't even begin to take care of what I was feeling, really I couldn't say anything of what I was feeling because there was so much, words couldn't handle it, and making love only made it worse because then I wanted words badly but they were no good, no good at all, but I told her anyway, I was lying on top of her and her hands were up by her head and my hands were on hers and our fingers were locked and there was a little light on her face from the window but I couldn't really see her and I was afraid to say it but I thought I better say it because I want her to know, it was the last night, I had to tell her then or I'd never have another chance, I just said, before you go to sleep, I just said, I have to tell you before you go to sleep that I love you, and immediately, right away after, she said, I love you too, and it sounded to me as if she didn't mean it, a little flat, but then it usually sounds a little flat when someone says, I love you too, because they're just saying it back even if they do mean it, and the problem is, that I'll never know if she meant it, or maybe some day she'll tell me whether she meant it or not, but there's no way to know now, and I'm sorry I did that, it was a trap I didn't mean to put her in, because it was a trap, if she hadn't said anything at all I know that would have hurt too, as though she were taking something from me and just accepting it and not giving anything back, so she really had to, even just to be kind to me, she had to say it, and I don't really know now if she meant it.

Another bad time, but it wasn't exactly bad, but it wasn't easy either, was when I had to leave, the time was coming,

and I was beginning to tremble and feel empty, nothing in the middle of me, nothing inside, and nothing to hold me up on my legs and then it came, everything was ready, and I had to go, and so it was just a kiss, a quick one, as though we were afraid of what might happen after a kiss, and she was almost wild then, she reached up to a hook by the door and took an old shirt, a green and blue shirt from the hook and put it in my arms, for me to take away, the soft cloth was full of her smell, and then we stood there close together looking at a piece of paper she had in her hand and I didn't lose any of it, I was holding it tight, that last minute or two, because this was it, we'd come to the end of it, things always change, so this was really it, over.

Maybe it works out all right, maybe you haven't lost for doing it, I don't know, no, really, sometimes when you think of it you feel like a prince really, you feel just like a king, and then other times you're afraid, you're afraid, not all the time but now and then, of what it's going to do to you, and it's hard to know what to do with it now.

Walking away I looked back once and the door was still open, I could see her standing far back in the dark of the room, I could only really see her white face still looking out at me, and her white arms.

I guess you get to a point where you look at that pain as if it were there in front of you three feet away lying in a box, an open box, in a window somewhere. It's hard and cold, like a bar of metal. You just look at it there and say all right, I'll take it, I'll buy it. That's what it is. Because you know all about it before you even go into this thing. You know the pain is part of the whole thing. And it isn't that you can say afterwards the pleasure was greater than the pain and that's why you would do it again. That has nothing to do with it. You can't measure it, because the pain comes after and it lasts longer. So the question really is, why doesn't that pain make you say, I won't do it again? When the pain is so bad that you have to say that, but you don't.

So I'm just thinking about it, how you can go in with \$600, more like \$1,000, and how you can come out with an old shirt.



Circle of Friends



An Interview with Lady Diana Cooper

Lady Diana Cooper was born in 1892, daughter of the 7th Duke of Rutland. Her mother, Violet Lindsay, was a Pre-Raphaelite artist and beauty, and the granddaughter of the 24th Earl of Crawford. Her pale, iridescent beauty—"the texture of Chinese silk" (Winston Churchill), her acute intelligence and iconoclastic wit, her innocent sense of fun, frank enjoyment of privilege and total lack of snobbery, made her "The Idol of the Golden Generation" before the First World War—a generation in which aristocracy and Bohemia met and mingled, and in which she became one of the most remarkable and famous women of her time. She was loved by some of its greatest men: Prime Minister Asquith, the great bass Chaliapin, the newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook, and many others. Considered a suitable bride for the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII and after his abdication the Duke of Windsor), instead she fell in love and married Duff Cooper, a junior diplomat without a private income.

In the Twenties, partly to improve their finances and partly because she "could never say no," she starred in two silent

Above: Lady Diana Cooper in the '20s.

Photo by Lallie Charles.

movies (the first British Technicolor films) and later enthralled America and Europe in Reinhardt's The Miracle. Then she gave up her career to become a "full-time wife" when her husband left the Foreign Office for a career in politics and literature. After several ministerial posts, including Minister of Information in Churchill's War Cabinet, Duff Cooper became British Ambassador in Algiers, and later in Paris at the end of the War.

Throughout her life, Lady Diana Cooper was befriended and admired by many of the famous writers and literary figures of her time: Evelyn Waugh immortalized her in Scoop, as Mrs. Stitch; D.H. Lawrence portrayed her in Aaron's Rod as Lady Artemis Hooper; she was Arnold Bennett's Lady Queenie Paulle in The Pretty Ladies; while her friend the playwright and novelist Enid Bagnold gave a touching and accurate picture of her old age in The Loved and the Envied.

Her own three-volume autobiography was published in the Sixties and became a best seller, revealing a writer of considerable talent and originality. With her son Viscount Norwich (author John Julius Norwich), she has founded the Duff Cooper Literary Prize which this year was awarded to Richard Ellmann for his revised biography of James Joyce.

Lady Diana Cooper lives in a large house in Little Venice, London. It is full of the mementos of her long and exceptional life. She still looks beautiful despite her extreme frailty; deep blue eyes and porcelain skin still shine with a radiance that age has not impaired. Her bedroom overlooks a quiet garden; at home she spends most of her day there, sitting up in a large, lace-draped bed, surrounded by books and periodicals, and usually in company with her tiny Chihuahua called "Doggie," which she takes everywhere with her—even to the Royal Opera House where dogs are strictly forbidden: she hides him in her sleeve until she gets to her box. A stream of friends and relatives visit her in her bedroom, and it was there that the following interview about some of the literary personalities in her past took place.

SG: When did your connection with the literary world begin?

DC: I was born into it. My mother was a "Soul." Ah, you don't know about the "Souls"? They were a group of friends, people like Lord Curzon, no less, Lord Balfour, no less, and a few Pre-Raphaelites. It didn't mean much then, but it did later, because they all became *great*. So when I came out at eighteen I was called by the newspapers "the Soulful daughter of a Soul." The funny thing was that my mother didn't like being called a "Soul": she was too individual and didn't want to be part of a group, but I thought she ought to be proud of it. Then at a party one of my young men told me that I wasn't my father's daughter but Harry Cust's. He said everybody knew it. All I could say was: Oh really? It didn't seem to matter—I was devoted to my father and I liked Harry Cust too. Well *he* was a "*Soul*," very literary, and very handsome. He had a magazine called *The Pall Mall Gazette* where he published all the famous writers—Rudyard Kipling, H.G. Wells, and so on. My mother was very literary too: She liked all these *advanced* poets—Browning and Meredith; and I was named after Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways*. Now Meredith is an awfully complicated poet, but because of this Diana complex I had to learn his famous *Modern Love*, which is something like fifty sixteen-line poems, by heart. In those days you learnt *everything* by heart—so different from today when children don't even learn nursery rhymes. And you don't write letters either, because of the telephone; we used to write letters all the time and there were five or six deliveries a day. I wrote to my father when he went off shooting.

The first poem I learnt was Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd to his Love":

Come live with me and be my love
And we will all the pleasures prove. . .

When I was seven my Nanny taught me Kipling's
"The Road to Mandalay":

On the Road to Mandalay,
Where the flyin' fishes play,
And the dawn comes up like thunder . . .

something and something . . . I can't remember now.
My memory is not what it used to be—I think I am losing my marbles!

There is this nice young man who is writing the biography of Cecil Beaton who sent me a bottle of marbles for Christmas! But I have this theory that the more marbles you lose the better it is: my old friend Enid Bagnold had lost *all* her marbles and was very happy, while I have always been a prey to melancholia. It comes over you like a wave, engulfs you, and then subsides. . .

Anyway, my mother's favorite author was Shakespeare, naturally, because we were brought up with the Trees: Sir Herbert Tree was Mr. Daddy to all of us, and his daughter Iris Tree, who became a wonderfully talented artist and poet, was my best friend. We used to go into his dressing room, try on his costumes, put on his Richard III ring, go on the stage in the crowd scenes—I don't know how he bore us! Lady Tree was my mother's best friend, but we never knew, until much later, that he had a whole *other* family: somebody called Mrs. Reed, with whom he had five other children.

Anyway, Shakespeare was part of our lives. But as a child I got a disease called Erb's—I don't know if you spell it with an H or without—it is a form of paralysis of the arms. The doctors forbade lessons—*too wonderful!* As a result I grew up illiterate, and I still can't spell: my nephew Rupert Hart-Davis (author and publisher) had a lot to do with the punctuation and spelling when he published my autobiography.

- SG: As a debutante you had a great number of admirers — including your future husband — who were literary. Who were they?
- DC: We were a group of friends called “The Coterie,” and they were all literary, but they were *all* killed in the War. Some left nothing but letters, but some did write other things before they got killed, like Rupert Brooke. I didn’t take to him much, I don’t know why. I think he didn’t approve of us — we were too free and too drunk. I knew the Sitwells very well; though I was very thick with the brothers I never met *her*, Edith. I didn’t like her poetry — it was too modern for my taste, which is rather old-fashioned. Then after the First World War, I married Duff who became a very good writer. His biography of Talleyrand made his name as a writer, but his best book is his autobiography — *Old Men Forget*. And now my granddaughter Artemis is editing our letters.
- SG: Your parents wanted you to marry the Prince of Wales, and the Duke of Connaught wrote that you were the only woman who could keep him on the throne. What happened?
- DC: We met, naturally, but he used to say: “I’m quite a good Prince of Wales but I shall be a hopeless king.” Do you know this poem:

And were you pleased, they asked of Helen in Hell.
Pleased? Answered she, when all Troy’s towers fell
and dead were Priam’s sons and lost his throne —
And such a war was fought as none had known
And even the gods took part; and all because
of me alone? Pleased?

I should say I was!

Lord Dunsany wrote this poem about *her*, Mrs. Simpson, not about Helen. Everybody was, of course, against her, but I thought she was all right. Did you see the television series about them? [The TV series was

called "Edward VIII," with Edward Fox in the title role.] They made her look dull but tender. She was far from dull and *very* far from tender.

Duff wanted to be a politician and a writer; the Foreign Office had become very boring, as it is today — it's just cocktail parties, isn't it? So I accepted to appear in two films. They were awful! *Awful!* But I enjoyed *The Miracle*, and touring America. Then Duff gave up the F.O. and became an M.P. and later a minister. People asked me if I minded giving up my career. I didn't in the least; I *adored* my husband and hated being parted from him. At the time of Munich he was one of the few who sided with Churchill and actually resigned. I remember getting thousands of letters thanking him for protesting against the invasion of Czechoslovakia. John Julius, a secretary, and I spent days forging his signature on answers.

SG: Did you meet any American writers when you were in America?

DC: No. A great many journalists and stage people, not writers. I met Noel Coward, though, who was living there and we became great friends.

SG: There is a story about your first meeting with Noel Coward. Allegedly you said to him: "Mr. Coward I saw your play last night and I didn't think it was at all funny," to which he is supposed to have answered: "Madam, I on the other hand saw you in *The Miracle* and I just laughed and laughed."

DC: Totally untrue. I always *adored* Noel. You see we both had mothers, and our two mothers got together and entertained each other, thank God, which made us free to go out and have fun. Then Noel took to horse-riding. Well, I can't ride at all, but my friend Iris Tree, who was with me in *The Miracle*, was very good at it and loved it. So we all three went to a riding school and Noel was terrified! They had little things for jumping over and Noel said: "I can't bear it because every time I want to jump the horse turns round and

says 'bet you can't!' "

Alas, Noel got old and died . . . I used to go to Switzerland and stay with him, but he was ill and couldn't go up the mountains. Now his memoirs have been published and are full of accounts of the diseases homosexuals get. . . Yes, I loved Noel dearly, very dearly, till the end.

SG: What about Hemingway? Did you meet him?

DC: Only years later, in Paris after the War. He came to the Embassy and his former wife Martha Gellhorn who was a great friend of mine—and still is—wrote to ask me to receive him. The day he came I was in bed with a bad cold, so he came and sat by my bedside. It was cocktail time and I asked him to go next door and help himself to a drink from the drink table, which he did. Then every few minutes he went back to fill his glass and became more and more drunk. By 8 o'clock he was talking utter nonsense. He started reciting a long poem, and it turned out to be his own. It was *awful*! Well I didn't know how to get rid of him—he just sat there and sozzled! So I'm afraid the meeting was not a great success and I never saw him again. But I liked his books: the one about the Spanish Civil War. . . What was it called? There goes a marble! Oh yes, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and the other one about the War . . . *Farewell to Arms*.

SG: You met Evelyn Waugh in the Twenties and became lifelong friends. Where did you meet him?

DC: When I was in *The Miracle* in London. It is awful to admit, but I liked him because he liked me. Also, he was a challenge: everybody hated him because he was so rude and so snobbish, so I thought I would like him. We remained best friends till two years before he died. Then he became too melancholic. I used to do *everything* to cheer him up. He lived in the country, because he wanted to be a *grand seigneur*, and I would buy—very much against the grain I might add—caviar and champagne and take him to the theatre: "Oh no,

not the Stalls! A Box!" He wasn't exactly a drunk, but he drank a lot; I didn't mind that—I was brought up with drunks. He could be dreadfully rude: once we invited Huxley to lunch at the Embassy in Paris—not the novelist, his brother, the one who had run the Zoo in London, Julian Huxley. Evelyn took a delight in nagging him and hurting him. Now Julian had become something much grander than the Zoo, head of UNESCO, and didn't want to talk about the Zoo. But Evelyn *would* mention monkeys and parrots all the time and Julian got crosser and crosser; it was very embarrassing. We had another rough passage with Somerset Maugham, Evelyn and I. I loved Willie Maugham, but he was very difficult, too. I took Evelyn to stay with him in his beautiful villa in the south of France and it was a ghastly failure, because Evelyn got on the wrong tack. He had his portmanteau which he got out of the car hoping that he would be asked to stay. But the silly ass said something so tactless about stammering and deafness, and the portmanteau was put back in the car by a servant and he was asked to leave—because, of course, Willie Maugham stammered and was deaf.

SG: You wrote once that you thought "Graham Greene is a good man possessed of a devil, and Evelyn Waugh is a bad man for whom an angel is struggling." When did you meet Graham Greene?

DC: He came to Chantilly where I had kept a house after we left the Embassy in '47. There was a cottage in the garden, very derelict and hopeless—it didn't have a bathroom or anything. Graham Greene said: "Would you mind if I come and live there, to write?" I said it would be wonderful and he said: "Would there be room for a woman?" I said yes, but she won't like it—it has no comfort. He had a mistress called . . . you must know? I can't remember her name—there goes another marble! Well anybody could tell you. One day Enid Bagnold and I went to lunch with him at the

Ritz—he had got some money for his book and taken a suite at the Ritz where he was living with this Mrs. Thing. At lunch the talk was on Catholicism—they were both Catholics—and G.G. said: “You Protestants are so lucky not to have things like Purgatory to face.” Whereupon she turned on him furiously and said, “How dare you say they are lucky? They are *unlucky*!” So we went on with this very highbrow, moral talk. After lunch Enid and I went through the bathroom to the bedroom and there on the bed, folded neatly, was a pair of pyjamas on one side and a nightdress on the other! They were living together in *open sin*, with all that high moral talk, and she was married and had five children. He still sends me a book a year. I loved *The Heart of the Matter*, and the one after, but I was bored by the last one.

SG: In the Thirties did you get involved with the Bloomsbury set?

DC: Not really. They came after the First World War, and we were the generation before, most of whom had been killed. But I had a great friend, Desmond MacCarthy, who was very thick with them, and through him I met Lytton Strachey whom I liked very much. Desmond was a famous journalist who wrote for all the top papers. We all loved Desmond, but he didn’t have the drive that is needed to become really famous—he was too charming and too lazy. Although he was queer, Lytton Strachey had a mistress called Carrington. She went to the Slade as an art student and so did my friend, Iris Tree. I had no talent, but I went also for fun and to be with Iris. My mother and sisters were very good painters and draughtswomen, but I wasn’t. My eldest sister, Marjorie, was a genius—she could do anything. She fell in love with a young man who was penniless and my mother didn’t want her to marry him. Then suddenly someone died and the penniless young man became the very rich Marquess of Anglesey, so everyone agreed to the marriage.

But then *he* had second thoughts and went away for a while. So my sister was heartbroken, and began to go out with Prince Felix Yussoupov, who had murdered Rasputin. Well that was all right by me. But then the Marquess got wind of it, rushed back and married my sister. I wasn't pleased—I preferred the assassin.

Anyway, the Slade was frightfully cold and frightfully boring. You drew lots of plaster casts and then the great moment came when you graduated to the "life class." That was even colder, with these poor nude models trembling and freezing to death. One evening I went to Strachey and Carrington's house and there was Virginia Woolf. I was staggered: I had been told she was beautiful, but I didn't think she was at all. Then she asked me a succession of questions, like a machine gun, and I couldn't get over it. I can't say I liked her—all those questions! You would have thought she was interested, but I read much later that she did this to *everybody*.

And I knew Vita Sackville-West very well. My parents wanted her to marry my brother John (later the 8th Duke of Rutland), but she married Harold Nicolson. In those days you no longer arranged marriages in England the way you do to this day in France. Vita had rather a moustache early on—very masculine. Then a few years ago this *extraordinary* book came out which was about her affair with Violet Trefusis. [The book was called *Portrait of a Marriage* and was written by Nigel Nicolson]. I knew Violet Trefusis very well, but I had no notion of her lesbianism. The funny thing is that her letters are much better than Vita's, who was the literary one of the two. Nowadays there is a movement that wants to liberate male homosexuals, but female homosexuals don't have to be liberated—they always have been.

SG: D.H. Lawrence portrayed you in *Aaron's Rod* as Lady Artemis Hooper. Did you meet him?

DC: Only once—but I didn't take to him much. *Lady Chatterly* shocked society, but it didn't shock me. I thought Lawrence just used words which nobody else was using. I don't judge books; I have no critical faculty, I just like them or don't. But I was very friendly with Arnold Bennett who also put me in a book, which I didn't mind. Like Evelyn he was a challenge: nobody liked him, so I thought I had to. Through Bennett I met H.G. Wells whom I became very fond of. Before the First World War he had invented a game called "The War Game," with tin soldiers and guns, which we all played. We didn't know how soon afterwards we would be playing the real thing, and that most of the players would be killed. Then later I became friends with Moura Budberg, who was Wells's mistress for a long time. She was a wonderful Russian woman who had been Maxim Gorky's mistress, and then married a Baron Budberg. Anyway, we stayed friends till the end.

SG: At the end of the Second World War your husband was sent to Paris as Ambassador. Your term of office has become legendary. Did you meet many French literary figures?

DC: In fact, we were first sent to Algiers as a stepping stone to the Paris post. Our great friend was Gaston Palewski, who had come to England as John the Baptist to announce the arrival of the Saviour—de Gaulle. So in Algiers, de Gaulle came to dinner. We were absolutely awe-stricken and I didn't know what to talk about. Well, when people are in despair about conversation the best thing is to talk about childhood because then you become equals. So that went wonderfully well—*"Mon père était très dur, ma mère était très douce"*—that sort of thing. He had heard that for a while, when my husband was out of office, I had kept a small farm and when the conversation sagged he said, *"Comment va la vache?"* But he spoke an exquisite French and wrote it too. I think de Gaulle and

Churchill would have survived through their writing even if they hadn't become great as statesmen. Anyway, Gaston Palewski became a Minister and brought *everybody* to the Embassy. Through him we met Louise de Vilmorin whom I adored. She became my husband's mistress for a while and my best friend. One day Louise produced Malraux, with whom she had had an affair in youth. I found him alarming, very serious, and I knew I could never get close to him. We used to call him "Monsieur de" (with reference to Vilmorin's famous novel, *Madame de . . .*). Do you know that at the end, they got back together and lived with each other till they died?

SG: Did you read his books?

DC: Good Lord no! I shouldn't have understood them, should I? Have you read them? Anyway, I had less time to read than before. I had read a great deal in youth.

Nancy Mitford was living in Paris too and was a great friend. She used to come to the Embassy a lot and later to Chantilly to write. She wrote a book called *Don't tell Alfred* which made fun of me, but I didn't mind at all, I thought it was funny. Gaston Palewski was the love of her life—"The Colonel" we all called him. "Oh yes, I adore him, I adore him," she used to say, but there was never any question of marriage between them. In the end he broke her heart by marrying someone else—a fabulously rich woman who had a palace like Versailles, with a heated lake—not a swimming pool, a *lake*, heated! And the whole place was full of Talleyrand things because she was descended from him.

SG: Did you establish a circle of friends there like "The Coterie"?

DC: Oh yes, *la bande*. The leaders were Louise [de Vilmorin] and Cocteau. Cocteau was very bright and sweet. He talked constantly and used to raise his hand so that nobody else could speak while he monologued.

There was “Bébé” Bérard [Christian, a famous stage designer], whom I adored, and many others. Everybody came to the Embassy—I can’t remember them all—Gertrude Stein and her girl friend, Eluard, Aragon . . . everybody. I had met Aragon years before with Nancy Cunard, with whom he had an affair. Then on the rebound he married this Russian woman [novelist Elsa Triolet] and became a communist. Nancy’s mother, Emerald Cunard, was a great friend of mine. She had married someone quite unsuitable for her called Sir Bache Cunard, who was a Master of the Hounds and that sort of thing, and Emerald proceeded to take lovers immediately. One of them was George Moore who was devoted to her and whom they said was Nancy’s *real* father because Nancy looked exactly like him. But as George Moore looked exactly like Sir Bache Cunard it was hard to tell. I always say it doesn’t matter. People make too much fuss about infidelity nowadays.

SG: You also met Karen Blixen through Cecil Beaton at this time: what did you think of her?

DC: A friend in Paris called Dolly Radziwill had married a Dane and Karen Blixen used to come and stay with them and I saw her often. She was not at all the *grande dame de lettres* that you might imagine—the opposite, very simple and interested in everything. I think she had developed a kind of sixth sense on account of having lived so long in Africa. Cecil Beaton was going to photograph her shortly before she died. He rang her up to say would she mind if he postponed it for a while. She told him that if he didn’t go then, he would never see her again. So Cecil cancelled everything and went. Then she died—she knew.

Then a great many stage people came to the Embassy. You see, hotels were scarce after the War. At the same time there was a tremendous atmosphere of good will and euphoria as a result of the Liberation and a great *va-et-vient*. So we put up everybody—

everybody who was anybody, that is—at the Embassy. Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh came. I loved her—she was very beautiful and intelligent and she could talk about other things than the stage, which he didn't. Stage people always speak about the theatre, but I don't mind that—I can take it.

SG: After the War, Churchill's Conservative government fell and Labor won the elections. You left the Embassy in 1947, but kept the house in Chantilly. What happened next?

DC: Well, Churchill had won the War and couldn't believe that they would get rid of him so soon. But they did and he was very cross. He said, "They say it is a blessing in disguise. Well, it is very well disguised!" Ernie Bevin became Foreign Secretary and came to Paris. I liked him very much and he liked us. When he called us back to London he said, "Duff must go to the 'ouse O' Lords." But in fact it was the Conservatives, when they came back in 1951, who gave Duff his peerage.

Lots of friends came and stayed in Chantilly: Nancy [Mitford] came and wrote there, Paddy [Patrick Leigh-Fermor], Evelyn [Waugh] and many more.

SG: After your husband's death you set up the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize which this year was given to Richard Ellmann for his biography of James Joyce. Did you ever meet Joyce?

DC: Never could read *him*! Too modern for me. I always dread the prize-giving ceremony. This year Stephen Spender is doing it. One year I remember it was the American poet Robert Lowell. But he had a nervous breakdown and was sent to a loony bin—not for the first time I might add. So we looked frantically for a replacement and John Julius found someone distinguished and we thought all was well. On the prize-giving day I was standing next to a tall man who seemed quite drunk and I started telling him the story of how the man who was to award the prize had gone

bonkers and was taken to a loony bin. At that point my son came forward and said to him: "Mr. Lowell will you come with me?" I didn't know what to do—evidently he had decided to come at the last minute. Fortunately he seemed too drunk to take it in.

SG: Is there anybody you have wished to meet and haven't?

DC: Not really. I never liked people because they were famous. Whenever I met someone I liked them or didn't, but I didn't care about their fame. Where I was lucky was getting involved with the stage for a while, because it was such fun. But not because of fame. Perhaps because I have always been famous and took it for granted; I didn't consider it important. Even now I keep getting letters from all over the world asking me about all sorts of things, even the Crimean War—as if I had been there! I don't really want to meet any more people—I am too, too old.

Yes, I have always been famous, and I shall never know why.

—Shusha Guppy

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Raymond Carver is a recent recipient of the Strauss Living Award, granted by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. His most recent book, *Fires* (Capra Press), is a collection of stories, poetry and essays. "Careful" will appear in *Cathedral*, a short-story collection (Knopf, forthcoming).

Lydia Davis has recently taught writing and translation at the University of California at San Diego, and is the author of two books of fiction. "Break it Down" will be included in her third book, *Stories and Other Stories*, appearing this fall from The Figures.

James McCourt is the author of *Mawrdew Czgowchwz*, published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux in 1975, and the *Kaye Wayfaring Stories*, which have appeared in the *New Yorker*. This excerpt is from the sequel to *Mawrdew Czgowchwz*, *Time Out of Mind*, to be published by Knopf.

Charlie Smith lives in Iowa City and is a former Teaching-Writing Fellow at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. He is at work on a novel. This is his first published short story.

POETRY

Killarney Clary lives in Los Angeles. Her chapbook, *By Me, By Any Can and Can't Be Done*, was published by Greenhouse Review Press in 1980. **Alfred Corn's** most recent book was *The Various Light* (Viking, 1980). He has recently been living in New York.

Lydia Davis is the translator of three books by the French critic and novelist Maurice Blanchot. She is currently translating a novel by Conrad Detrez, tentatively entitled *Weeds*, to be published by Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Robert Fitzgerald's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* will be published this fall by Random House.

Geoffrey Hill has just received the Loines Award for Poetry from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. His version of Ibsen's *Brand* was published by the University of Minnesota Press in 1981. Mr. Hill is a Fellow of Emmanuel College and University Lecturer in English at Cambridge University.

Howard Nemerov's new book, *Last Things/First Light*, will be published in the autumn by University of Chicago Press.

Molly Peacock, the author of *And Live Apart*, University of Missouri Press, has poems forthcoming in the *Georgia Review* and the *Mississippi Review*.

Timothy Steele's first collection, *Uncertainties and Rest*, was published by Louisiana State University Press in 1979. *The Prudent Heart*, a chapbook, appeared from the Symposium Press early this year. He lives in Los Angeles.

INTERVIEWS

Jannika Hurwitt is a freelance writer who lives in New York City. Her work has been published in the *Paris Review*, the *Village Voice*, *Soho Weekly News*, and *Yankee Magazine*.

Mona Simpson, a senior editor of this magazine, has published in *The Three-penny Review*, *Quilt* and *Mademoiselle*. She is working on her first novel.

ART

Nancy Dwyer was born in New York in 1954. Her paintings and drawings have been exhibited at the Drawing Center, New York, the Renaissance Society, Chicago, and Semaphore Gallery, New York.

Steve Gianakos was born in 1938 and lives in New York. His paintings and drawings have been exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, the Hirshorn Museum, Washington, D.C. and in a recent one-man show at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

Judy Pfaff was born in London in 1946, and lives in New York. She has exhibited internationally and has created environmental installations at the Whitney Museum, New York, the Venice Biennale, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, and the Holly Solomon Gallery, New York.

FEATURE

Shusha Guppy is a London-based writer who contributes regularly to the *Daily Telegraph*, British *Vogue* and other periodicals. Also a singer, she recently released an album of English poetry set to music entitled "Durable Fire."

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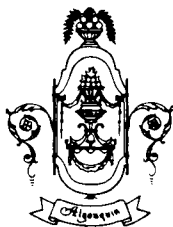
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